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WESTERN ACTION

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Volume 12 October, 1947 Number 1

COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

(First Magazine Publication)

GAMBLER'S GOLD
.....By Peter Field 10

When steel moved into Powder Valley, peace flew out the window and Pat Stevens, Sam Sloan and One-Eyed Ezra again found themselves standing virtually alone against overwhelming odds. And the payroll robberies were threatening to wipe out what little measure of civil order that was left!

SHORT STORIES

CONESTOGAS FOR CHOTEAU.....By Lee Floren 89

Sometimes its hard to distinguish between treachery and honest mistakes!

WHIZZERS..... (Dept.) .....By The Cowpoke 107

ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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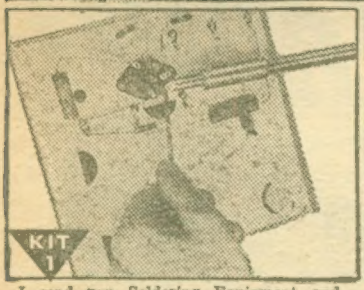

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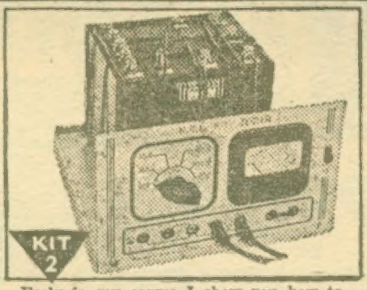

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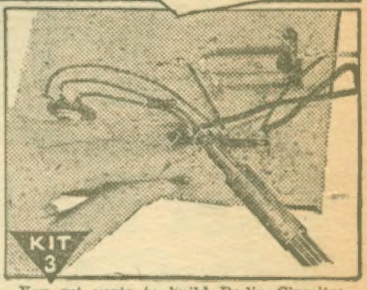
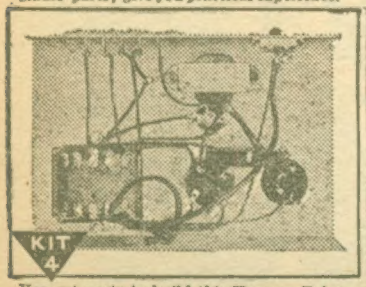
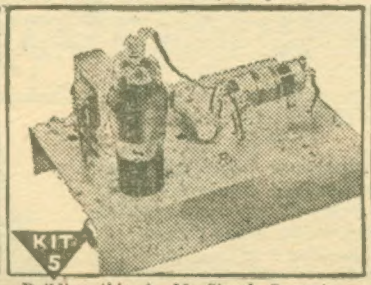


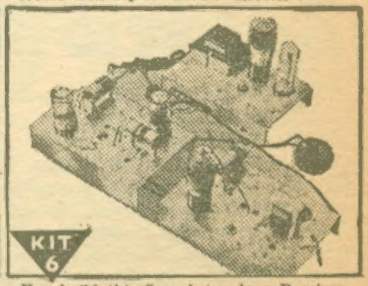
You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits; how to locate and repair circuit defects.



You get parts to build this Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds; learn to correct power pack troubles.



Building this A. M. Signal Generator gives you more valuable experience. It provides amplitude-modulated signals for many tests and experiments.



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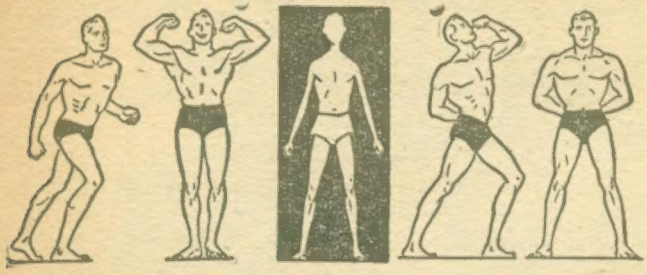

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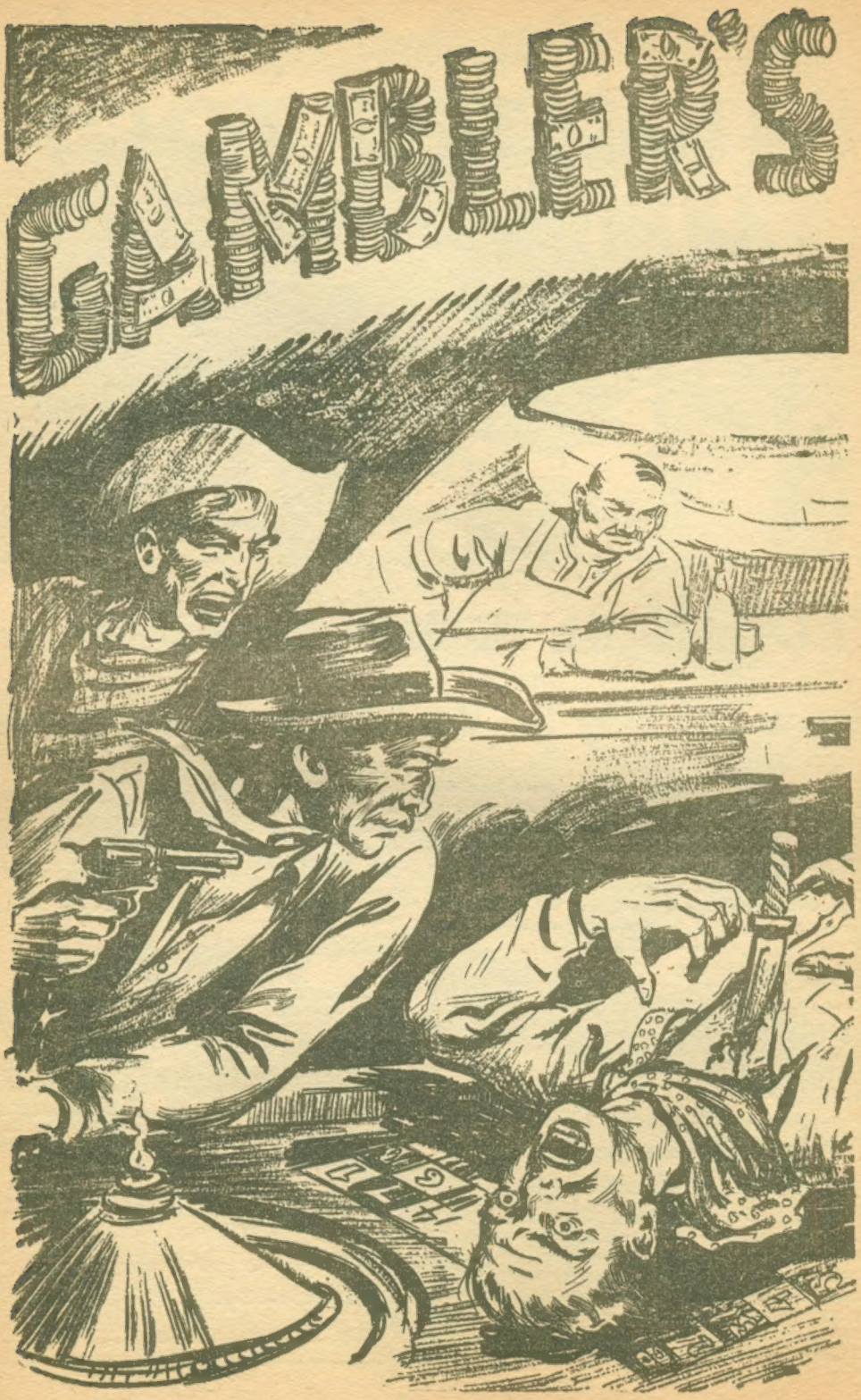
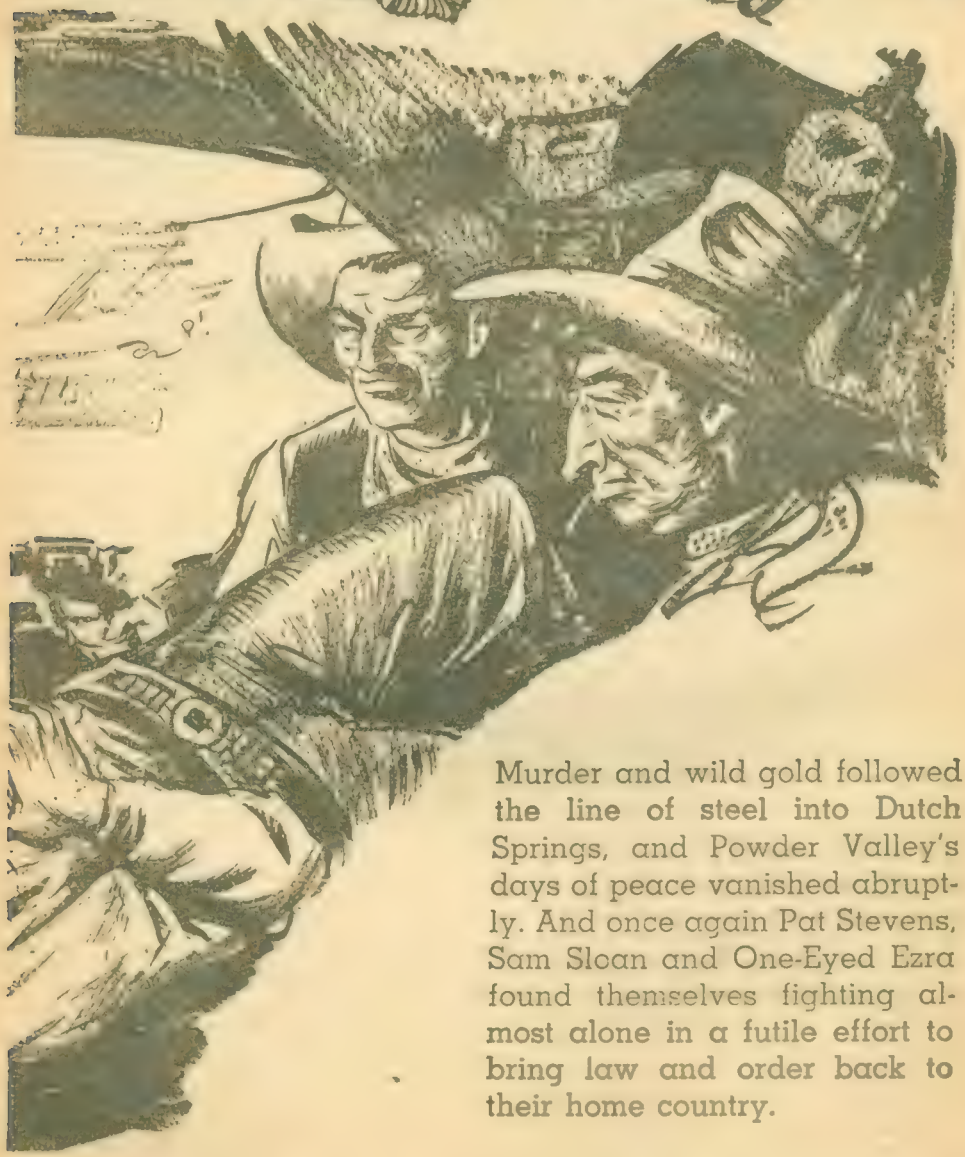

GAMBLER'S

GOLD

by Peter Field



Murder and wild gold followed the line of steel into Dutch Springs, and Powder Valley's days of peace vanished abruptly. And once again Pat Stevens, Sam Sloan and One-Eyed Ezra found themselves fighting almost alone in a futile effort to bring law and order back to their home country.

FIRST MAGAZINE PUBLICATION OF THIS COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

PAT STEVENS, narrow-hipped sheriff of Powder Valley, gazed bitterly down the sun-drenched length of Main Street, Dutch Springs.

Memory flew back a brief six months. He saw Dutch Springs as it was then, a lazy cowtown, sleepy and untroubled, ponies flicking flies at the hitch rails, riders drifting through the bat wings of The Gold Eagle saloon, sun-bonneted housewives gossiping in the General Mercantile Store. That was the Dutch Springs he had known for ten—fifteen years. Now the shining steel of the Chicago & Rio Grande Railroad snaked across the zinc carpet of the sage, crawling further and further up the Valley each day, like a huge glistening rattlesnake. Like a rattlesnake, too, it packed a sting.

With eyes slitted against the glare, the sheriff surveyed the street, black with surging humanity—brawny Irish laborers, sombreroed Mexicans, sober-clad gamblers, sweating Easterners in store suits, dance-hall girls, dark-featured desperadoes, nondescripts, a score of types as foreign to the Valley as coyotes in a calf pen.

Even the town had changed beyond recognition, cluttered as it was with the sudden growth of clap-board saloons, tented gambling hells and sprawling dance halls. All of which displayed crudely lettered signs that made a circus of a Main Street that now stretched way out beyond what was once the outskirts of town.

The sheriff listened in disgust to the torrent of sound that gave expression to the reckless life of the town. Unconsciously, Pat stiffened in his seat under the wooden awning of The Jewel Hotel. "And this is Powder Valley! Don't it beat hell!" he muttered.

"Vulture Valley!" cut in a swarthy, stocky individual in rider's garb, seated on his right, bright, inquisitive eyes flecking over the jostling throng that surged along the plankwalk.

"Reckon yore right, Sam," agreed the sheriff. "Steel shore brought a pasel of vultures to fatten like hawgs on railroad payrolls."

A huge man on Pat's further side shook an unruly mop of red hair and glared at the throng with one eye. The lid of the other lay flat upon his cheek, cut through by a jagged white scar that slanted up across his forehead. "Gutter scum!" he rumbled. "Thicker'n fleas on a houn' dawg. But they'll drift, thank Gawd, when steel's laid."

Bare-headed, a white-aproned barkeep pushed through the knots of loungers who cluttered the plankwalk. Glancing quickly to right and left, he finally sighted Pat's star and ambled towards the trio. "Jasper knifed in The Bucket of Blood, sheriff," he announced laconically. "Reckon trouble's brewin'."

Pat sighed, rose to his feet and hitched up his gun-belt. Killings were commonplace in Dutch Springs these days. Prisoners were packed in the little adobe jail tighter than oysters in a can, and a dozen deputies could do no more than maintain a pretense of order.

"I'll be along, pronto," he told the waiting bar-keep.

"Want we should side yuh?" inquired Sam, his bright eyes snapping at promise of trouble.

"Nope," grinned Pat good-naturedly. "I gotta stop a riot, not start one. Rest yore laigs and keep outa trouble."

With long, unhurried strides he moved past the sun-blistered facades of Main Street, until his tall figure was swallowed by the tight-packed throng that spilled off the plankwalk into the dusty roadway.

Pat knew The Bucket of Blood only too well. It was the noisiest, toughest and most unwieldy joint on Main Street, and a trouble breeder. A high wall of raw lumber, already blackening and shrinking in the burning sun, formed the front. Across the cracked boards the words BUCKET OF BLOOD were rudely painted in scarlet letters. A wide aperture served as doorway, but there was no door, for the place was never closed. formed the roof, secured to windowless plank wall. A long bar ran down the left side of the establishment,

flanked by tawdry gilt-framed mirrors and shelves upon which a legion of bottles glittered in the light of lamps swinging overhead. To the right were faro tables, chuck-a-luck, blackjack, roulette. Between, small tables and chairs were scattered over the sanded floor.

In the rear, an archway gave admittance to a dance floor, from which a stairway led to cubicles on the second floor—nests of the "Girls."

PUSHING through the crowd of shirt-sleeved construction hands, Pat wormed his way inside. His grey eyes searched the saloon. Men bellied four-deep at the bar; clustered like ants around the gambling tables, and bunched in noisy groups over the floor. Through the archway he glimpsed red-shirted workers whirling short-skirted, rouged partners. Clouds of swirling tobacco smoke dimmed the yellow light of the oil lamps. A cascade of sound filled the air—Pat headed towards it.

With difficulty he elbowed a passage through the sweating, yammering men. At last he gained the fore-front. A table lay over-turned, bottles and glasses spilled in the sand. Beside it sprawled a lanky construction worker in earth-stained shirt and dark pants, stuffed into high boots. The bone haft of a knife protruded from his hairy chest. His mouth gaped open and his eyes were fixed in a glassy stare.

Crouched, and tensed like wolves for the kill, two groups of belligerents glowered at each other across the limp form. On one side were three raw-boned, red-faced Irishmen. One flourished an open jackknife; his companions clutched splintered chair legs in huge paws. Facing them stood a group of dark-featured Italians, thin and wiry, each gripping a slim stiletto. Around them pressed the crowd—shouting, urging, taunting.

Pat stepped into the cleared space; moved between the opposing factions.

"Nix on the knife play," he ordered curtly. "Who stuck him?" He jerked his head towards the prone figure.

Balked of its show, the crowd snarled like a wolf pack. Curses and catcalls thickened the air.

The sheriff waited patiently until the noise subsided.

"Who knifed him?" he repeated.

The burly Irishman with the jackknife spat in the direction of the bunch of taut, wary Italians. "Wan of thim monkeys, begorra, and you kape out av this!" he boomed.

Pat moved towards the Irishman. "Pocket that knife and point out the killer," he snapped.

A concerted howl from the crowd drowned the Irishman's reply. A wave of men surged forward, irresistibly propelled by those pushing behind. In a flash the sheriff was packed tight by onpressing humanity, as helpless as a chip in a strong current. A flying boot struck him below the knee. He staggered. A calloused fist thudded against his ear. Another boot took him in the groin. Fighting to regain balance, he went down amid the vortex of men. As he hit the sanded floor, heavy boots flailed into his ribs.

Desperately, Pat fought to regain his feet. Steel had brought new methods of warfare to Powder Valley, of which booting was the most common. Once flat on the floor, he knew that his life was not worth an adobe dollar.

Fighting blindly, he rose to his knees, still surrounded by the crowd of excitement-crazed men. A heavy square-toed brogan took him in the stomach. Gasping with agony, he fell backward, head bedded in arms for protection as savage kicks rained upon him. "This is it!" he thought dully.

Even as his bruised body hit the floor, the sheriff was conscious of a diversion. He heard the flat impact of fists on flesh, howls of pain and protest. A man fell across his body; others were reeling and dodging right and left. The crowd melted. He gazed up into the yellow light of a brass-bowled lamp overhead. Painfully he thrust his bruised body off the floor and stiffly struggled to his feet.

Surly-faced men, some bloodied and battered, ringed him, held at bay by a tanned, black-haired young giant in checked shirt, tight breeches and laced knee boots. Behind his rescuer

stood a knot of big-muscled Irishmen, grasping portions of broken chairs. One spat on his hands and grinned expectantly.

"Hurt, sheriff?" The voice of Pat's savior was pleasant, well modulated.

The sheriff stretched his sore limbs and smiled wryly. "I'd have been cold meat if you hadn't butted in. Thanks mister!" He eyed his rescuer, who over-topped his six feet by a good two inches. The tall, black-haired young fellow had the lean, hard features of an outdoor man, tanned deep by long exposure to the sun. His eyes were deep set, dark, intense. There was a grim set to his tight lips.

"Ain't I seen you around town?" inquired Pat.

"I imagine so." The other smiled, and his face was transformed. "My name is North. They call me Bill. Assistant Paymaster down the yard."

"Wal, Bill, I won't forget. Right now I got some unfinished business." Pat's hand dropped to the smooth butt of the gun on his hip. His eyes challenged the circling onlookers. "Next guy who rushes me gets a lead pill. Who croaked thet jasper?" He nodded at the lax body, now trampled by a score of boots.

AGAIN a roar of invective poured from the crowd of Irish, Poles, Mexicans, Italians—tough construction workers to a man. A swarthy fellow, bleary-eyed and belligerent, stepped out of the throng, bulled forward, mouthing threats. Four paces from the waiting sheriff he stopped, raised his right arm and slid a slender blade from a neck sheath. Pat's gun leapt up and out. The roar of the explosion drowned the tinkle of the knife as it dropped to the floor. With a howl, the swarthy man grabbed his right hand with the left, striving to staunch the stream of blood that spurted, scarlet, from his wrist.

Sudden silence fell over the surrounding throng; men on the outer fringes of the crowd began to drift back to the bar and gambling tables. Pat Stevens had established his authority, and the fight was over. Pat holstered his smoking gun and was about to move away when a girl disdainfully emerged from the crowd.

"Maggie Maloney," murmured Bill North at Pat's elbow. "Queen of The Bucket of Blood. She'd just as soon flash a knife as a smile. Quite a passion flower, eh?"

The girl stepped out into the cleared space in which lay the remains of the murdered man, surrounded by fragments of smashed tables and chairs. She eyed the trampled form with casual interest .

Passion flower was right, thought Pat. Maggie's shapely form appeared to have been poured into a black velvety dress, glittering with sequins, that clung close to every curve. Cut low, it revealed a white neck and more than a suggestion of rounded breasts. Her arms were bare. Coppery hair, thick and lustrous, was piled high on her head, secured by combs that sparkled with tiny brilliant stones. Her brightly painted lips were as wilful as those of a spoiled child. But it was her eyes, which boldly met his scrutiny, that intrigued the sheriff. They reminded him of a panther's. Suddenly she smiled, and they were transformed into soft, glowing pools of seduction.

"What's going on here?" she demanded in lazy, husky tones.

Pat nodded at the recumbent figure, "Jasper knifed."

Maggie's white shoulders lifted in an indifferent shrug. "So what? There's plenty of the same breed left."

"And plenty of leeches to suck their blood," mocked North.

The girl's eyes flamed, she took a quick impetuous step forward. "Just what do you mean by that crack, big boy?" The lazy caress had fled from her husky voice.

North smiled coldly. "You got me, first time, Maggie. I mean leeches, silken leeches, swollen fat on gambler's gold."

WITH A SWIFT, graceful motion, the girl leaned down, whipped up her scintillating skirt with one hand, displaying slim, silken legs; slipped a squat dagger from beneath a garter top with the other. Before she could straighten the

brawny railroader was upon her. North's strong fingers fastened upon each white arm. While she screamed and struggled like an infuriated wildcat, he held her with ease, grinning down into her raging eyes.

"Hey, what's the trouble," demanded a high-pitched, nasal voice. Pat, a silent spectator, swung round to see a tall, hatchet-faced man, precisely dressed in sober black, flanked by two burly house men, break through the throng.

Lerou, proprietor of The Bucket of Blood, with his hooded eyes and hooked, acquisitive nose, always reminded the sheriff of a bird of prey. Diamonds glittered on his long, bony fingers. Though his small, darting eyes were venomous, his long face was set in the fixed smile of geniality affected by saloon keepers, a smile which was as artificial as his neat, well-brushed toupee. A bulge beneath the left armpit of his tight fitting coat indicated a hideaway.

Lerou strode to where the dishevelled Maggie, half sobbing with impotent anger, struggled ineffectually in North's iron grasp.

"Keep your dirty paws off a lady," he snarled.

"I always do." The railroader smiled with his lips, but his dark eyes were wary.

"Crown the big ox!" shrieked Maggie.

Pat thrust between the two men. "Lerou," he warned curtly, "another killing in this joint and I'll close it. And get that woman outta here, or I'll arrest her f'r attempted assault and disturbing the peace. Loose her, North!"

The young fellow stepped back. Maggie, panting, patted her coppery hair into place. Lerou, still smiling mechanically, but with vindictive fire in his small eyes, spoke to her in forceful undertones.

With a shrug of her white shoulders, she turned and squirmed through the crowd.

The sheriff touched North on the shoulder. "Reckon we'll drift." Together they threaded through the packed tables that dotted the sanded floor. Out on the plankwalk, North inflated his lungs with a deep-drawn breath. "Gosh," he grinned, "this air is ambrosia after the stench of Lerou's joint."

Pat rolled a smoke, appraising the young assistant paymaster's muscular frame and bronzed features thoughtfully. "Say, you don't shape up like an office man," he commented.

"I'm not," smiled the young giant. "Mining engineer 'til I signed up with the Chicago and Rio Grande. Had a bout of malaria in Chile. Invalided back to the States. Had a mind to look the West over, so I took this job. Great country—out here!"

"Ef you crave tuh see more of it, watch your step," advised the sheriff quietly. "There was shore death in Lerou's eyes when you manhandled his gal."

"She's not his wife?"

"I wouldn't think so," drawled the sheriff.

CHAPTER II

DAYLIGHT dwindled, but the deep-throated roar that was the voice of Dutch Springs grew as the sinking sun silhouetted the rugged Culebras. The prairie greyed with the oncoming night while Main Street blossomed with gaudy splendor. Glaring torches and smoking oil lamps reflected upon the dark features of sweated construction workers pouring up from the Yard, eagerly seeking saloons and gambling tables after their day's work on the parched flats. Tents glowed like luminous balloons. The yapping of barkers and shouting of exuberant workers mingled with the tinny blare of music and strident laughter of women. Dutch Springs was warming up for its nightly spree.

In his leanto office back of the adobe jail, Pat leaned back in a creaky swivel chair and grinned at Sam's sardonic features. "Pay day t'morrow!" he announced ruefully.

"And hell u'll pop aplenty in Dutch Springs," grunted his pard. "How many stiffs did they plant last pay day—six?"

Pat shrugged. "Mebbe, but what's one more or less when they knock 'em

off every night? Wal, it won't last f'rever, like Ezra says. The coyotes follow the payroll, and the payroll follows steel. The track's snaking ahead right fast." He rose and tugged a shapeless Stetson over his forehead. "Le's take a pasear down tuh the Yard. Pay train's due in pronto. Some gun-totin' galoot might get ideas."

Side by side they elbowed down thronged Main Street, heading for the construction camp on the south edge of town. The clamor was muted as they followed the curves of a deep-rutted wagon road. Ahead, wavering lights pricked the night like swarming fire-flies. Soon they were threading between huge mess tents, storage sheds, ties stacked as high as the Court House. Mules were tethered in long lines; wagons parked in endless rows; tents mushroomed by the score. Through all the seeming confusion ran spur tracks, upon which engines snorted as toiling gangs loaded shining steel rails and fresh-cut ties upon long flat cars. This was the Yard, the nerve center of construction, the workers' city.

The pair reached the main track, gleaming steel on raw earth, laid straight as an arrow north and south. The brisk clatter of a key rattled from a telegrapher's shack. Near by, sputtering torches illuminated the dun sides of a boxcar. Through the sliding door, gaping wide open, Pat saw a fleshy man sitting with his chair tilted back, legs stretched over a flat-top desk, chewing on a fat cigar. He wore a grey shirt and dark pants, and a gun was holstered about his waist.

Pat mounted a short wooden stairway and entered the car.

"Howdy, sheriff!" The thick-set man waved his cigar lazily. A shrill whistle echoed far off over the flats. "Here she comes! You boys will be busy tomorrow!"

Mark Wizner, Chicago & Rio Grande paymaster, although his belly bulged over the broad cartridge belt buckled around his waist, had the reputation of being thoroughly competent, but his lips were too loose for the sheriff's liking. Talk was that he liked his women. Not that that amounted to much, these days, thought Pat.

A WHITE light bloomed far down the track, grew in intensity until an engine hissed to a stop opposite the pay car. Behind it were hitched an Express car and caboose.

Two armed men dropped off the caboose and the door of the Express car rolled open. Bill North and an assistant, Colts bumping against their legs, emerged from an adjoining boxcar, and the transfer of the squat leather sacks of gold in which reposed the Chicago & Rio Grande payroll commenced.

North and his helper toted the sacks to the paymaster. Wizner tallied them and dropped each sack with a metallic thud into a large iron safe behind the desk.

Pat and Sam hunkered against the car. "Two guards!" snorted Sam, above the hiss of escaping steam, "and they's a sackful of galoots around town who'd croak a guy f'r his boots! Some day they're gonna knock thet payroll off."

"Maybe that's why we stick around," suggested Pat blandly.

Finally, the Express car emptied. Pat tossed aside the butt of his cigarette, rose slowly and stretched— his ribs were still sore from the impact of construction boots. The engine shunted on to a siding. Wizner waved his hand from the pay car door with a shouted "goodnight!"

Pat returned the salutation. "Be careful!" he yelled. "Thet stuff's mighty dangerous company."

Wizner chuckled, "I never take a chance!" With both hands he slid, the heavy armored door shut with a clang.

It was midnight when the sheriff mounted the worn stair carpet of The Jewel Hotel. The hectic life of Dutch Springs was still in full blast, but Pat knew from dire experience that he would not see his bed for twenty-four hours after railroad gold commenced circulating on the morrow. He sat on the battered iron bed and eyed the bare walls, straight-backed chair and pitcher-crowned washstands of the drab hotel room with distaste. Quite

a contrast to the cozy ranch house back in the foothills, he thought ruefully, with Sally, his golden-haired wife, serving up a tasty supper, and Dock, his stripling son, currying his saddle horse. A feller didn't get much time to spare for home life these days. Some time, mebbe, when steel was laid things would never be the same again. He unbuckled his gunbelt and hung it on a bed post. Yanked off his boots and pitched them into a corner.

"Sheriff, hey, sheriff!" The shouted refrain awoke Pat. Someone was racing up and down the passage outside, yelling frantically. Pat stirred, snapped wide awake, and abruptly sat up in bed. The first grey light of dawn was coming through the open window.

Pat slid out of the sheets, hastily pulled on his pants, and padded to the door in his socks.

A HARRIED looking man in his shirt sleeves, eye-shade pushed up on his forehead, was frenziedly pounding doors, ignoring the storm of expletives that exploded in his ears.

"I'm the sheriff!" bawled Pat. "What's wrong?"

"You're wanted down the Yard—quick," the man gasped. "Paymaster's dead and the payroll's looted."

"Step inside!" invited Pat briskly. The messenger followed him into the the room and flopped wearily onto the bed.

"Who are you?' questioned the sheriff, tugging on his boots.

"Telegraph operator, graveyard shift, Stanton's the name."

"When did yuh get wise tuh Wizner's killin'?"

"Not thirty minutes back. A 'rush' come thru from Chi. I toted it down tuh his quarters, right next to the pay car. The pay car door wasn't closed tight. I knew the payroll was checked in last night, so I took a look-see." He shuddered. "There was Wizner, blood all over his shirt, and the safe wide open."

"When did you go on duty?" Pat buckled on his gunbelt.

"Midnight."

"Everything hunky-dory then?"

"Couldn't say, sheriff, had no reason to look."

"Anyone around—when you found him?"

"Nope—I hotfooted it f'r you."

Pat grunted approval, slammed on his Stetson. "Wal, le's go!"

The two ran down the stairs and hurried across the hotel lobby. Every leather rocker lined along the walls held a sleeping man. The shirted forms of weary construction workers sprawled on the bare boards of the floor, one stretched along the cigar counter.

Outside, in the chill dawn, quiet had at last descended upon Dutch Springs. The flaming torches had gutted out. Tents gleamed like specters in the half-light. Drunks dotted the plankwalk and one or two reeling men roamed aimlessly through the dust of the street.

In the telegraph shack, the key was clacking insistently when they hit the road bed. Pat's companion scurried over to his instrument while the sheriff headed for the pay car. Down the track, freight cars caromed and clashed, shuttled by a snorting engine There was no sign of life around the boxcar that housed Wizner's two assistants.

The heavy door of the pay car gaped open. Pat ran up the wooden steps and came to a quick stop as he caught sight of the paymaster's body slumped in a swivel chair behind his flat-topped desk.

Wizner's head drooped upon his chest, bedded upon a fleshy chin. Irregular rust-like stains marred the front of his grey shirt. His arms hung limp.

Pat gently unbuttoned the stained shirt and eased it open. The rolls of fat on Wizner's chest were caked with congealed blood. A puckered hole over the heart told the story. The sheriff touched the dead man's head, it was cold and set stiff. The arms were like ramrods. Carefully, he withdrew Wizner's gun from the dangling holster, broke it and examined the loads. It had not been fired. Replacing the weapon, Pat turned to the safe. The massive door was swung wide open, a bunch of keys hung from

the key hole. A few account books lay on a top shelf, but the sacks of gold had disappeared.

Lips pursed, the sheriff stood back, eyes searching the office. Nothing else appeared to be out of place. The story seemed plain—the killer, or killers, had surprised Wizner at his desk, shot him, taken his keys, opened the safe and fled with the Chicago & Rio Grande payroll.

CURIOUSLY, Pat examined the walls of the plainly furnished office. The whole car was a huge safe. Over-lapping sheets of iron were bolted to the sides and ceiling, like the scales of a fish. Even the sliding door that provided the only exit was armored. If the door had been secured, nothing less than a charge of gunpowder could have forced entrance.

Had it been secured? Two large bolts were screwed to the inside. A quick inspection showed they had not been forced. On the outside of the door a heavy padlock, open, hung from a hasp. Had Wizner shot the bolt when he clanged the door shut after the gold was unloaded? If so, and he opened the door to admit the killer, why had he not been shot in his tracks, instead of at the desk? Why hadn't he gone for his gun? Maybe, mused Pat, he had neglected to bolt the door and the killer had eased it open a few inches and shot him from outside.

The sheriff stepped outside, slid the door shut with considerable effort, then endeavored to ease it open, inch by inch—as the killer might have have done. The dusty wheels on the guide rail upon which the door was hung squealed dismally. Wet with sweat from his efforts, Pat desisted—and forgot his theory of shooting from the doorway.

It was bright daylight now and the Yard pulsated with activity. Black smoke from belching locomotives stained the clear air. A string of flat cars clanked past, stacked high with ties and steel. Across the track, hostlers were tossing hay in the mule lines. Construction laborers swarmed around the tent dormitories, eager for pay call. Only the most essential work would be done today and the labor bosses would have trouble aplenty rounding up hands to do that; for pay day was lay-off day. A painful surprise was in store for those jaspers, ruminated the sheriff. At any rate, there would be a few less killings in Dutch Springs when the night loosed the devil's carnival down town.

Two other boxcars stood on the spur track below the pay office. The first, Pat knew, was the murdered man's living quarters; the second housed the two assistant paymasters. He knuckled the door of the assistant's car.

Bill North, bare to the waist, razor in one hand and chin lathered, slid it open. "Morning, sheriff," he grinned "All set for a heavy day? Better get some rubber walls on that dinky jail." Then, observing the sober set of Pat's features, he dropped his bantering tone "Trouble?" he queried.

"Plenty trouble," Pat's voice was curt. "You stick around last night?"

"Never left my quarters after we checked the payroll."

"Hear any noise, a gun f'instance?"

"There's plenty noise around the Yard at night, sheriff. They load the cars after sunset. Yard men are switching and making up trains all night. You wouldn't notice a battery of artillery, firing salvos."

"So!" Pat scratched his ear. "See Wizner after I pulled you out?"

"No, the old man bolted himself in the pay car. He usually makes a final check-up—time sheets, you know—the night before we pay out."

"You plumb certain he bolted himself in?"

'Well, I didn't exactly see him, but he always does," returned North, a little lamely.

"Ef so, he opened up agen. He was plugged and the payroll lifted."

"Who killed him?"

"You tell me!" replied the sheriff tersely. "There'll be hell tuh pay! The Road figgers a few laborers u'll curl up, but plugging a paymaster and lifting a hunk of railroad dinero is something different." A thought struck him. "Say, mosey down tuh Doc Trimble's. Tell him he's wanted

urgent. And don't spread the news—yet."

Without further words, the young assistant paymaster reached for a towel, wiped the soap off his face and slipped on his shirt. "Hey!" barked Pat, as North ran down the steps. "You fergot yore iron." He nodded towards a gunbelt hanging from a peg.

North smiled. "I never carry a gun, sheriff, except on duty. Mine's probably choked with dust. Never pressed the trigger since it was issued."

THE SHERIFF nodded, watched North's tall form swing out of sight along the track, then slipped inside and swiftly scrutinized the interior of the car. Two bunks were built across the far end. In one, the blankets were tumbled; the other was neatly made up. A small table and chairs were set in the center. Articles of clothing were suspended from hooks along the side. Several valises were stacked in a corner. At the other end of the car stood a pot-bellied iron stove. Pat tested the top with his hand—it was cold. He lifted the lid, ignited a stinker and peered inside. The stove was a quarter full of wood ashes. Next, the sheriff rolled up his sleeve, explored the inside of the stove pipe—and was rewarded by no more than a sooty arm.

He turned to the assortment of clothing and tentatively fingered coats, shirts, pants. Then he snapped open the holster flap of North's gun and lifted out a heavy Colt.

The appearance of the weapon verified North's words. Dust lay heavy on butt and cylinder. Pat pressed the release key and the cylinder dropped into his hand. It was empty! The sheriff smiled absently. North evidently relied upon his hard fists if trouble cropped up. He perfunctorily sniffed the barrel, replaced the cylinder and slid the pin home.

Further search yielded nothing. Pat was not surprised. He had not expected to find anything, but in a murder case a man could never afford to overlook a bet.

"Now for a look-see at Wizner's den," he murmured. "Reckon I got time afore Doc gets on the job."

The door of the paymaster's car was ajar. Pat's eyebrows lifted when he stepped inside—and his estimate of the dead man's character subtly changed. Compared with his subordinates, Wizner had lived in luxury. A heavy brass bed, with white sheets and a silk spread, stood at one end, partially screened by a flowered curtain hanging from a cross-wire. The floor was covered with a thick rug, centered by a circular mahogany table upon which stood a glass bowled lamp and a box of cigars. Two comfortable rockers, upholstered in brown leather, flanked the table. The walls of the car had been painted a soft cream and upon them were pinned a collection of nudes that would put the rankest joint in Dutch Springs to shame.

Voices down track pulled him to the door. Tubby, red-faced Doc Trimble, squinting fiercely through thick-lensed spectacles and toting his inevitable black bag, stepped briskly over the ties beside North's big, easy-gaited figure.

At sight of the sheriff, the doctor emitted a disgusted snort. "Homicide, homicide, homicide! That's all I hear, morning, noon and night. Won't I ever have another case of good old-fashioned measles! Well, where's the cadaver?"

"Right here, doc!" Pat led the way into the car, the irascible little doctor at his heels. Bill North headed for his quarters.

DOC TRIMBLE took one look at the crumpled figure and dumped his bag on the carpet. The little medico and Pat had worked together on cases for many years and the sheriff knew his irritability was a thin veneer that covered a warm heart and sound medical knowledge.

"Well, what do you want to know—the cause of death?" snorted Trimble, indicating the bullet hole with a stubby fore-finger.

"Nope, even a dumb sheriff could figger thet out," smiled Pat. "Jest tell me how long the jasper's been dead."

Trimble rounded the desk, bent and examined the wound closely. Then he fingered the dead paymaster's stiffened arms, worked downwards, endeavored to flex the cramped legs. Finally, he straightened flicked out a white handkerchief and vigorously polished his glasses.

"Wal, doc?" drawled Pat.

"Eight hours, ten at the outside—rigor mortis is complete."

"Thet would place the killin' somewheres afore midnight. Thanks doc!"

"Damme!" ejaculated the sheriff, as Trimble's rotund figure disappeared around the end of the car, "I plumb overlooked Wizner's other assistant! Howcome he's not around?"

CHAPTER III

NORTH HAD finished his shave when the sheriff again hammered on the door. "Whar's the other gink?" Pat demanded, easing inside. For a moment the tall young railroader hesitated. "Down town, I guess," he replied casually, too casually.

"Bunk down here last night?"

North was obviously at a loss. "No," he admitted reluctantly.

"Howcome?"

"Oh, he has friends in town, often spends the night with them." It was plainly apparent to the close-watching sheriff that North was ill at ease.

"Quit covering up," he snapped. "You acquainted with these friends?"

"I am not!" replied the other with emphasis.

"Come down off yore high hawse, mister," warned the sheriff softly. "This ain't play acting—it's murder."

Quick anger sparked in North's dark eyes. "I realize that, sheriff," he replied tartly, "but what Jeff does off duty is none of my business."

Pat smiled, sat down, pulled a sack of makin's from the pocket of his loose-hanging vest and leisurely rolled a smoke. North was plainly a high-spirited horse who would not take the spur.

"I get yuh, Bill," he replied soothingly, "but you got the wrong angle. I wanna clear yore pard, not convict him. Now cool off, rest yore laigs and give me the lowdown, you know the hairpin better'n any man around here."

North tamped tobacco into a stubby briar, squatted on a seat and applied a match to the bowl, frowning in indecision. For a minute or so he puffed vigorously, then, "What do you want to know?" he asked gruffly.

"All you know about this Jeff jasper.'"

The young ex-engineer slowly dribbled a smoke through his nose. "Well, in the first place, Jeff doesn't need money that bad. His father is a director of the road, rolling in filthy lucre. Jeff's a good fellow, as easy-going as they come but with no more backbone when it comes to booze and gambling than a jelly-fish. His family shipped him west because he drank like a fish. Now don't get me wrong, sheriff." North pointed his pipe stem at the lounging Pat. "Jeff's not vicious. The fellow's as harmless as a puppy. He's just weak, and he's a sucker for a skirt."

"Ain't I seen him around the faro tables at The Bucket of Blood?"

The other smiled. "Probably, he haunts them. Silky Selby holds a flock of his I.O.U.'s. That wolf knows papa will pay—if necessary."

"And last night?" prompted Pat.

The wooden steps that led up to the car door creaked behind him, North's clear-cut features eased in manifest relief. "Here's Jeff, thank heaven!" he exclaimed. "Question him yourself!"

Pat turned to watch the approach of a flabby-featured young fellow. "Like North said, weak right through," decided the sheriff, noting the pouched folds of flesh beneath the newcomer's bleary eyes, his wide amiable mouth, smudge of mustache, eyes as soft and melting as a rabbit's. Geoffrey Glencourt's tan shirt was wrinkled and his high boots crusted with dust. The aroma of stale whisky hung around his person. A gun was holstered in a black leather holster at his side.

"Meet the sheriff, Jeff!" drawled North.

THE NEWCOMER blinked, focussed his eyes on Pat's tall figure in quick surprise, then as hastily averted his gaze. He nodded abruptly and stepped into the car.

"What a night!" he yawned. "and now pay day! Ye gods, is there no rest for the wicked?" He swung round towards North, "I say, Bill, you invite your guests rather early."

"The sheriff was waiting for you," replied North shortly.

Glencourt wheeled like a startled colt. "Me?"

"Jest checking up on yore whereabouts last night," said Pat casually.

"And what business is that of yours?" There was a note of irritability in Glencourt's voice.

"Wizner was cut down and the payroll lifted," Pat came back starkly. "I'm checking up."

"Mark Wizner dead!" Glencourt's mouth gaped. His eyes wavered before the sheriff's direct gaze. "Surely you don't suspect me?"

"I suspect everyone 'til I jug the killer. Now jest where and when did you hit the hay last night?"

"Oh," returned Glencourt vaguely, fondling his soft, whisker-stubbed chin, "I played a little poker in The Bucket of Blood."

"All night?"

"No—er—I retired around three a. m."

"Where did you bunk down?"

"With a friend."

"Gimme his name!"

"I say sheriff," pleaded Glencourt, flushing, "I really can't—it was—er—a lady!"

"Ef yore alibi cain't be verified you go into the hoosegow," pronounced Pat inexorably. "Suspicion of murder."

Glencourt wriggled indecisively. North stared out of the door.

At length Glencourt muttered sulkily, "Blondy!"

"One of Lerou's gals?"

"Yes."

"Lemme see yore iron!"

Glencourt gingerly tugged the weapon out of leather and passed it to the sheriff. Pat gave it a quick once-over. The death slug had not been fired from that gun. He turned to the door with a curt nod.

Through the grimed windows of the telegraph office Pat glimpsed the harried-looking operator hunched over his instrument. The sheriff pushed open the door and entered. A plain plank counter spanned the little shack. Behind it, the operator sat at a table, jammed against the rear wall. The instrument stammered noisily, while Stanton scribbled rapidly on a pad. He clicked a staccato acknowledgment, then his head slewed around and he squinted at Pat from beneath an eye shade. "Grabbed the killer?" he inquired.

"Not yet! Anything on yore mind?"

"Headquarters got Pinkertons on the trail," volunteered the other eagerly. He tore the top sheet off his pad. "Run yore eye over this!"

Pat stretched across the counter and fingered the flimsy. Quickly he read:

G. McAllister,
Chief Engineer,
Dutch Springs.

Have instructed Pinkertons to investigate Wizner's death and payroll robbery. Their operator Pearce now at Indian Creek. Proceeding to Dutch Springs immediately. Should arrive noon. Afford him full facilities also enlist aid local sheriff. Will duplicate payroll.

Walsh
Superintendent.

Pat tossed the sheet back. "Feller you relieved at midnight around?"

"Ted Salmon?" The operator fished a fat timepiece out of his vest pocket, slipped off its soft leather fob. "He's due on day shift right now." Boots crunched on the sand outside. "Here he is—Ted's as regular as the sun."

A soldierly fellow with ruddy cheeks and square shoulders kicked open the door and slammed a lunch box on the plank counter. His quick eyes flashed to Pat's star and he grinned.

"You know why I'm hangin'

around?" queried the sheriff with an answering smile.

"Reckon I can guess—Wizner!"

"You hit it! Lamp anyone skulking around the Yard last night?"

"Yep!" replied the squarely build man, without hesitation.

Interest gleamed in Pat's grey eyes. "Kin yuh describe him?"

THE OPERATOR'S forehead furrowed. "Wal, sort of. Somewhere's after eleven o'clock a fat feller dodges around them empties on the siding yonder." He nodded across the track. "I figgered it was a drunk. The jasper cupped a match in his hands and lit a cigar. Give me a sight of his map. It was fat and round." He paused.

"Note anything special—like a scar?" prompted Pat.

"Nope, but oh boy! He sure wore a sparkler on his finger, bigger'n a headlight."

"Right hand?"

Salmon ran thick fingers through his greying hair. "Lemme see! He held the match in thet hand. Yep, right hand."

"Rolly Poulhi!" thought Pat. "Pal of Silky Selby's." Aloud he said, "Thanks, old timer!" He turned again to Stanton. "You keep copies of incoming messages?"

"You bet!" grunted the night operator. He grabbed a long spike, set in a slab of wood. A thick wad of yellow sheets were skewered upon it. "Wanna look 'em over? Reckon you got authority."

Pat nodded. Stanton dropped the duplicates on the counter and shrugged into his coat.

The sheriff gave his attention to the messages. They had been spiked as received, time and date noted on the corner of each sheet. He slid off the previous days flimsie and leafed them over. They appeared of no interest—official messages regarding work and supplies. Suddenly Pat held his breath. Carefully he re-read a short, curt note:

Geoffrey Glencourt
Assistant Paymaster
Dutch Springs.

Not another dollar to pay your gambling debts. Your mother and I disgusted—and deeply disappointed.

Thomas Glencourt.

"So friend Jeff needed dinero, bad," pondered the sheriff. "And a dance-hall gal is his only alibi f'r last night."

He laid the flimsy to one side and continued to con through the duplicates. Again his attention was arrested. With knitted brow, he digested another:

William North
c/o Paymaster
Dutch Springs.

Identity established. Changed name before proceeding to Chile. Full report follows by mail.

Acme.

Further search revealed nothing with any apparent bearing on the case. Pat re-skewered the flimsies. The two addressed to Glencourt and North he carefully folded and stowed in a pants pocket. "So-long!" he flung in Salmon's direction. The operator, busy at his instrument, nodded absently.

Deep in thought, the sheriff legged over the ties towards town. During the years he had toted a sheriff's star he had been called upon to solve more than a few murders. Always, he had based his investigations on the axiom—Find the motive! Pat's theory, oft proven in practice, was that once a motive was established, apprehension of the killer quickly followed.

In this case now, he pondered, Geoffrey Glencourt had a clear motive—accustomed to lavish spending, deep in debt, source of cash cut off. He knew the payroll was guarded only by Wizner, was acquainted with the paymaster's habits, was a basically weak character. Logically, that made him suspect number one.

But why was Rolly Poulhi moseying around the pay car after dark? Pat knew Rolly—everyone knew a barrel, with shrewd eyes buried in beds of fat. Rolly circulated freely

among everyone, from saloon keepers down to grimy-handed track layers. But the spot where the sheriff saw him most frequently was The Bucket of Blood. Funny how the trail always doubled back to Lerou's joint!

Pat's questioning brain next turned to Bill North's telegram. Whose identity was established and why? Who and what was Acme? Plenty work ahead, he thought wryly, checking on leads. Not much chance of getting the goods on the killer before Pinkerton's man turned up.

MAIN STREET was clouded by a dank atmosphere of depression. News of the murder and payroll looting had swept over town like a prairie fire. Few were concerned with the murder, killings were too commonplace, but the payroll looting was a different matter. Men glumly gathered on the plankwalks or drifted aimlessly up and down Main Street, scuffing up the dust, unresponsive for once to the yapping of barkers and the hurdy-gurdy music of the saloons. Pockets were empty; for there were few who had not spent their last dollar in anticipation of pay day.

Before steel snaked into the Valley, thought Pat, as he elbowed through the disconsolate groups, crowding saloon fronts like thirsty steers around dried-out waterholes. The Gold Eagle would always stake a man to next pay day. But the breed who ran the new crop of dives were like a flock of vultures—they'd pick his pockets and pitch him out into the gutter.

Pat stepped into the semi-darkness of the huge canvas-covered structure of The Bucket of Blood. A thin scattering of men were sprinkled down the long bar, nursing their drinks. Two bartenders listlessly polished glasses. Chuck-a-luck, faro and poker tables were deserted. A forlorn group of girls hung around the dance-hall entrance in the rear. Lerou, hatchet-faced and sinister, moved restlessly around the vast emptiness like a brooding spirit.

Pat scanned the spread of vacant tables. His eyes lighted upon two men, seated at a small table against the side wall, heads together in close confab. He crouched across the sanded floor—one was Rolly Poulhi!

Rolly's huge bulk overflowed the straight-backed chair like a sack of jelly. His back was to the entrance and he gave no sign that he was aware of the sheriff's approach. His companion, Silky Selby, who bossed Lerou's gambling tables, watched Pat draw near with blank eyes. Selby's face was invariably as still and expressionless as a plaster cast. His white hands, slender fingers intertwined, rested easily on the table. He was neatly clad in sober black, with white shirt and string tie.

"Howdy, sheriff!" Selby's low, soft voice was little higher than a whisper. "Hear some guy turned a trick down the Yard last night."

"Yep!" replied Pat shortly. He came to a stop, standing above the pair and staring down at Rolly. "You hear anything?" he asked the fat man pointedly.

Rolly's face crinkled into a thousand creases. It reminded the sheriff of a big, white moon, in which two shrewd eyes were deep sunk. "Shore sheriff," he chuckled. "I hear everything, they all bring their troubles to good old Rolly. I kinda liked Mark Wizner, but," he spread his pudgy hands, "we all gotta go some time."

Pat hooked up a chair with his foot and jackknifed into it. "You take much excercise, Rolly?" he inquired casually.

The fat man shook all over with internal laughter, his triple chins and belly quivering in unison. "Do I take much exercise! Shore sheriff, at the bar, arm exercise—tilting a bottle!"

"Not leggin' around the Yard?" queried Pat carelessly.

Cold silence draped the trio. Silky sat like a graven image, cold eyes flicking from the sheriff's lean features to his companion's fleshly face.

Rolly stiffened, his wary glance meeting Pat's accusing stare. Then he commenced to chuckle again, a chuckle that grew in volume until his entire body palpitated.

"Kin you tie that, Silky?" he gasped. "The law puts the finger on

me f'r Wizner's killing—me, who'd never hurt a fly. Shore sheriff, I was down at the Yard last night, hunting Simpson, the commissary boss. Heard he could use a bunch of steers. Couldn't locate the gink. Got all tangled up—there ain't a marked trail in the joint."

"D'ye tote an iron?"

Again Rolly's features creased. "Me carry a gun! Hell, sheriff, no. I make too good a target."

PAT abruptly switched to the silent Selby. From the corner of his eye he observed Lerou's lanky figure, edging closer and closer along the wall, straining to overhear the talk at the table. "Set in, Lerou!" he flung over his shoulder, "afore you strain a gut."

Masked by his mechanical smile, the saloon keeper stepped briskly forward, pulled up a chair, eased up the legs of his well-pressed pants and sat down.

The sheriff was addressing Selby. "How deep's young Glencourt in the hole?"

Almost imperceptibly the gambler raised his dark-clad shoulders. "I don't discuss personal affairs," he purred.

"See here, mister!" Pat's voice hardened. "There ain't much law in Dutch Springs, but I aim tuh rod what little there is. Come clean or take a trip down tuh the caboose—it's jampacked with stinkin' drunks right now."

"Eight thousand dollars," whispered Selby.

"Thanks!" The sheriff scraped back his chair and rose, followed by three pairs of questioning eyes. "So-long, gents," he grunted. "I'll be seein' yuh—soon."

CHAPTER IV

NIGHT FELL on a spiritless Dutch Springs. The golden stream of payroll dollars had run dry, and the parasites who fattened on the earnings of the hard-toiling men of "steel" wilted in the drought.

Main Street was still a hurdy-gurdy but there was a hollowness in it's hubbub. Barkeeps yawned in the saloons, black-coated gamblers beguiled the monotony with solitaire.

Pat strode into his leanto office and scaled his Stetson towards a peg on the wall. Sam and Ezra hunched in chairs back-tilted against the wall. The litter of cigarette butts around their feet gave evidence that they had waited long for the sheriff's return. Sam's snapping eyes flashed an eager inquiry as Pat flopped wearily into his swivel chair. Ezra's one eye regarded the sheriff's dust-powdered form expectantly. The latter eased out his long legs, built a smoke with careful concentration.

"Wal, slip the dally off yore tongue," snapped the fidgeting Sam. "Who'd yuh put the finger on?"

Pat ran his tongue along the edge of the paper, scraped a match on the desk side, lit up and drew deeply on his cigarette. "No one," he replied shortly. "Thet payroll musta evaporated in the sun and, as f'r the killer, wal, mebbe it was Glencourt, mebbe it was Rolly, mebbe Salmon, the telegraph operator, mebbe some gink we never seen hair nor hide of."

"Plain as a boil on a pug nose," sniffed Sam, "and jest about as helpful."

"Spread yore hand, Pat," grunted Ezra, glaring at his squat pard. "You shore got us guessin'."

The sheriff wriggled into a more comfortable position. "Wal, le's start with Glencourt, he's one of Wizner's helpers. That gink sops up licker like a sponge, got no more backbone than a rope, and he's flat broke. His alibi f'r last night is Blondy, one of Lerou's gals. She swears Glencourt didn't step outside The Bucket of Blood 'til sun-up—and yuh should hear that skirt swear!

"Then Rolly was hangin' around the pay car mighty close tuh the time Wizner got his come-up-pance. He gave me a cock-and-bull story about hunting Simpson, the comissary boss, tuh sell him a bunch of steers. Simpson, tells me Rolly peddled enough beef last wek tuh feed the crews f'r

a month. So his alibi's hogwash. Which makes thet bladder of lard suspect number two.

"Then we got Ted Salmon, the telegraph operator. He was on duty in the shack below the pay car when Wizner checked out. Carries hisself like an ex-soldier. They's plenty on the railroad payroll. Shootin' comes easy tuh them. I checked on his record. Seems he plugged a greaser down Hopewell way. Thet don't mean, much, except Salmon's wife's mighty sick in a Kansas City hospital. Every dollar he draws goes east and he put the bite on Stanton a month back f'r the loan of a coupla hundred cartwheels. He shore craves dinero!"

"You plumb fergot Bill North," cut in Sam. "Warn't he around?"

"Yep, I checked on him, too," yawned the sheriff. "He got a wire yesterday." Pat pulled a crumpled yellow flimsy from his pants pocket and tossed it to his squat pard.

Sam smoothed out the sheet, scanned it and mumbled:

Identity established. Changed name before proceeding to Chile. Full report follows by mail—Acme.

"What in hell's thet all about?" he questioned, with crinkled forehead.

"North's twin brother, in New York," explained Pat. "Bill gave me the whole story. 'Pears the jasper hit the booze, was fired off his job, and sunk—without a trace. Bill hired the Acme Detective Agency tuh check up. The hombre had switched monikers and lit out f'r Chile. So thet's that!"

EZRA'S deep voice rumbled, "Yore barkin' up the wrong tree, Pat. Every hairpin in town knew the payroll come in last night. I'll stake my saddle some tinhorn mosied down tuh the Yard, blew out Wizner's light and highjacked the dinero. The gink's over the Border b'now."

Silence followed the red-headed man's pronouncement.

"Lamp thet Pinkerton guy around?" broke in Sam absently.

Pat shook his head. "Big shots from the east don't crave the help of no rawhide sheriff," he chuckled.

"Don't see as yuh could give him much," rejoined Sam sourly. He rose, "Cummon, le's licker! A feller kin get in a saloon f'r once without losin' the shirt off his back."

Black-lettered posters blossomed over Dutch Springs the following day. The sheriff and Sam emerged from the Chink restaurant opposite the Jewel Hotel after their customary breakfast stack of flapjacks, washed down by black coffee. They stopped and eyed a ragged Mexican as he lazily tacked one of the bills to the livery barn. It read:

$5,000 REWARD

The Chicago & Rio Grande Railroad will pay a reward of five thousand dollars for the arrest and conviction of the murderer or murderers of Mark Wizner, paymaster, at Dutch Springs, Colorado, May 20, 1872. An additional reward of one-fourth will be paid for all gold recovered.

Patrick Walsh
Superintendent
Western Division.

"What d'ye figger thet reward would tally?" inquired Sam, eyes darting over the big block letters.

"Twenty thousand cartwheels, I reckon," drawled the sheriff.

"Twenty thousand!" breathed the swarthy little man. "Gosh! Ain't yuh got a clue Pat?"

"I gotta five thousand bank plaster on my spread," Pat's lips quirked at the longing in Sam's eyes. "You go ketch this payroll hawg, and we'll divvy up!"

"I'd go corral thet Jeff Glencourt and the blonde filly, betcher they're workin' in cahoots."

"Gimme proof and I'll jug the hairpin," promised Pat dryly. "Me—I'm watchin' Rolly, he didn't hoof around the Yard f'r exercise, nor tuh sell steers. You and Ezra mosey around the saloons. Keep your ears open,

mebbe you'll soak up something besides bum licker."

Dutch Springs sizzled in the torrid heat of noon when Pat sought the shade of his office after a morning of fruitless ferreting. Geoffrey Glencourt, now thoroughly scared, still stuck to his story, and Blondy failed to crack under the sheriff's remorseless cross-questioning. Rolly Poulhi smothered his evident uneasiness with deep chuckles that shook his huge bulk, but stubbornly insisted he was hunting the commissary boss on the night of the murder. Salmon, the telegraph operator, swore he never left his shack—and there was no one to disprove his word!

PAT had scarcely loosed his belt and sunk into his chair when a heavy-set fellow with bulky shoulders darkened the doorway. The visitor had ruddy, weathered features. He was dressed in a dark, dusty store suit, topped by a grey Stetson. The sheriff's inquiring glance catalogued him as a rancher on a trip to town.

"You sheriff around these parts?" drawled the new-comer in slow, friendly tones.

"Shore—what's the trouble?"

"You should know!" Pat's visitor shook with silent laughter. He dropped heavily onto a chair. "Name's Pearce—Jake Pearce, of Pinkerton's."

Pat swung around and his appraising grey eyes met Pearce's steady stare. He had pictured the operative as a gimlet-eyed, alert individual. This fellow looked like he was more at home among cows than criminals. But the sheriff had learned, from hard experience, to reserve judgment.

Jake Pearce bit the end off a cigar with even white teeth. He lit up, unbuttoned his vest. "Wal?" he inquired placidly. "Got anything?"

"Nothing but ideas."

"Take a gander at that!" Pearce fumbled in his vest pocket, pitched a spent shell on the desk.

Pat picked it up, examined it casually, "Forty-five!"

"Sure—the bullet that croaked Wizner came outta that shell." Pearce puffed complacently.

"Yep!" replied Pat cautiously. He had a feeling that the Pinkerton man was leading up to a startling announcement. "Where did yuh pick it up—outside the car?"

The sheriff glimpsed amusement twinkling in his visitor's steady eyes. "Figgers he's scored over a hick sheriff," he thought. "What's he gonna spring?"

"Nope," drawled Pearce, "sifted the ashes in the stove—North and Glencourt's car."

"Glencourt!" exclaimed Pat, stirring with excitement.

Pearce's lips twitched with ill-concealed amusement. "Nope—North!"

The sheriff sat silent, digesting the Pinkerton man's words. Inwardly, he flayed himself for failing to make a more thorough examination of North's quarters. If the slug that killed Wizner came from that shell, and the shell was hidden in the Assistant Paymaster's stove, North's guilt was plain. Glencourt spent the night in town. North had admitted he was the only person around. But he knew North, Pearce didn't. Somehow the accusation didn't set right. What proof did the Pinkerton man have that this was the shell? It might have lain in those ashes for weeks.

"You plumb certain?" he asked.

"Dead sure—I got the gun!"

Pat masked his surprise. "From North's car?"

"Nope, he pitched it in the scrub, back of the car. Never woulda found it, but some cur dog nosed it out. Reckon I gotta break there," conceded Pearce equably. He straightened, buttoned his vest. "Guess I'll swear out a warrant and bring North in." He pulled a Colt .45 from an outside pocket and laid it on the desk beside the shell. "There's the evidence!"

"North around?"

"Handling Wizner's job down the Yard. I gotta shadow on him." The detective chuckled silently. "Figured I was up against a tough job, but it sure was a cinch!" Pat detected good-natured patronage in the Pinkerton man's voice.

Slowly, with a puzzled frown, he filled out the warrant.

AN HOUR later, Jake Pearce brought in the tall young railroader.

North's eyes were bewildered and his strong jaw was set in a stubborn line.

"Rest yore laigs!" Pat waved North to a chair when the detective's stocky form disappeared down the street. Stiffly, the young fellow sat down.

"Howcome you got tangled up in this mess?" inquired the sheriff easily.

"Ask that fool detective!" The young railroader's voice was harsh with bafflement. "He claims he found an empty shell in the stove and it fits my gun. Why, I haven't fired that gun since it was issued."

"Not the railroad iron," corrected Pat. He indicated the forty-five on the desk. "Thet one! He fished it outta the brush behind yore car." A thought hit him. "Say, you plumb certain you didn't leave yore quarters?"

Growning, North nodded his head.

"Didn't yuh take a pasear up the track tuh the telegraph shack?"

North's somber eyes lit with sudden recollection. "Certainly, but I wasn't away from the car ten minutes."

"Bill," replied the sheriff soberly. "Thet trip's gonna bust Pearce's case." He rose, "Right now, I gotta jug yuh, but you won't be there f'r long."

Pat slid open a desk drawer and dropped the keys of the jail inside. He built a smoke and frowned unseeingly at the fly-specked calendar on the wall as he mulled over the case.

If North killed Wizner, what was his motive? They were comparative strangers. Report was that they got on well together. The tall young railroader was well-behaved, had no bad habits. He didn't booze or gamble, was not in need of money. Why, then, would he risk the ruin of a fine reputation by murdering Wizner? The sheriff shook his head slowly. He'd never yet handled a murder case where an all-powerful motive was not the incentive for the crime. Except for paid gunmen and desperadoes, men did not kill unless impelled by unrestrained passion, uncontrollable greed or stark necessity. Here motive was entirely lacking.

His thoughts flew to Lerou and The Bucket of Blood. There was a tie-up somewhere between Rolly Poulni and the saloon keeper. Lerou had been as flurried as a brood hen when Rolly was questioned. The fat man was seen in the vicinity of the death car about the time the murder was committed. North had manhandled Lerou's fancy gal, and Pat had seen flaming rage in the saloon keeper's eyes when he broke into The Bucket of Blood fracas. What would be easier than for Rolly to shoot the paymaster, wait for North to leave his living quarters, slip in and drop the spent shell in the stove?

By this simple expedient Lerou and his gang would avert all suspicion and the saloon keeper would be revenged upon the young railroader. To further incriminate North, they probably dropped the murder weapon behind the car, knowing that sooner or later it would be found.

The longer Pat considered this theory, the more convinced he became that it fitted the facts. His next job was to convince Pearce. This might not be easy, he pondered, since the Pinkerton man was a stranger to Dutch Springs and was not familiar with the sinister reputation of The Bucket of Blood and Lerou's feud with North. Well, he'd try! Pat hadn't forgotten the debt he owed North, for his intervention in The Bucket of Blood fracas.

Hunting Pearce in the sprawling confusion of the Yard was akin to searching for a pin in a pile of hay.

WHEN THE squat grey adobe that was Dutch Springs jail was built, block by block, by a gang of Mexican horse thieves Pat Stevens had rounded up, citizens inclined to the belief that the sheriff was mebbe a mite too ambitious. One cell in the Courthouse basement had

served the town for twenty years. Why waste tax money in constructing six more? Kinda looked like the town was going to the dogs when it had to build a six-cell jail! Pat, however, insisted that since the labor was donated, albeit unwillingly, they build a real jail. As usual, he had his way.

The onset of steel proved even Pat a piker. Deputies packed drunks and disorderlies six to the cell and still they overflowed into the Courthouse basement. True, Judge Bemis held court daily, imposed stiff fines and did his full share to relieve the housing shortage, but though they cleared the cells each morning the saloons filled them again each night.

Due to the temporary dearth of dollars, the load had lightened after the payroll robbery, which enabled the sheriff to place North in a cell by himself. Unfortunately, the young engineer was not in a frame of mind to appreciate the honor.

Through a small square aperture high on the wall, the rising sun shone into the gloom of the jail. North, features taut and wan after a sleepless night, hunched on the edge of the bunk, staring at the stout iron bars of his cell. Around him, the barred cages held birds of every feather, from jabbering Italians to deep-chested Irishmen, the majority of whom were morosely recovering from overnight drunks. In hoarse chorus they groaned, cursed, or kidded, according to their natures. Not a sound registered with the disconsolate assistant paymaster—he was too deeply concerned with his own predicament.

The heavy outer door squealed open on dust-caked hinges. Gaunt Wes Langard, the jailor, lumbered in, followed by a vision that startled the frowsy, bleary-eyed prisoners into amazed silence. It was as though someone had tossed an orchid into a pig pen.

Maggie Maloney tripped demurely behind Wes, like a dove, or perhaps a bird of paradise would be more descriptive. She wore a floppy wide-brimmed hat, garlanded with tiny tiny flowers. A pale yellow silk dress rustled upon her lissome form, and long white silk gloves covered her arms. An orange colored parasol was suspended from one dainty hand. Her features were devoid of make-up, save for a faint suggestion of red that bloomed upon her cheeks. All of which combined to create the effect of a dainty, fragile slip of femininity, a veritable breath of spring interjected into the turgid atmosphere of the jail.

Langard nodded in the direction of the sulking North. The latter, despite the sudden cessation of noise, had not glanced up.

"Hey, North!" bellowed the jailor, "You got a visitor!"

WHILE HIS fellow prisoners eyed Maggie in awed silence, the assistant paymaster rose and moved stiffly towards his barred cell door. Maggie stepped gracefully up to the door, parasol swinging from a gloved hand.

Scarcely six inches apart, they faced each other through the bars. Frowning the prisoner gazed down in Maggie's dark eyes, soft and luminous beneath the brim of her wide picture hat.

"Hello sucker!" Her voice was too low to reach the expectant ears around. "This is what you get for sticking around. How come you didn't take it on the lam?"

"Why?" he demanded harshly.

Maggie smiled, a world of wisdom in her unfathomable dark eyes. "Why?" she mimicked. Her voice became crisp, "Quit kidding, big boy! Jack Pearce knows his onions. You croaked Wizner. Why in hell didn't you beat it with the dinero?"

"And if by chance I didn't kill Mark Wizner, should I still—beat it?" inquired North caustically.

"All right, all right," consoled Maggie. "You didn't croak him, so what? Jake Pearce put the finger on you, and that means you'll swing. Jake convicts 'em, every time. Say, you're as good as strung up right now."

North's strong fingers clenched on the bars. His whitened knuckles be-

trayed the stress under which he labored.

"Thanks for calling—to taunt me," his voice was brittle. "Paying off old scores, eh?"

Maggie's dark eyes burned into the prisoner's. "Aw, nix on that!" she snapped, reverting swiftly to her dance-hall manner.

"I like you, big boy—you got spunk." She swung the closed parasol close to the upright bars. North noticed a bulge in its silken folds. "I got a hideaway in this dingus. Grab it—and make a break!" The parasol slipped from her fingers, fell through the bars on to the cell floor. At the same moment, Maggie turned and tripped towards the rugged-featured Langard, standing stolidly by the outer door, effectually screening North from his eyes. "Oh, Mr. Deputy," she cried, "I dropped my parasol and that rude Mr. North wants to keep it—a keepsake, he says. Make him behave like a good boy, please!"

Wonderful playacting, thought North. He bent and picked up the fragile silken gadget, thrust it through the bars and held it towards the advancing jailor. Maggie minced beside Langard on high-heeled shoes. The girl pushed forward and snatched her parasol from North's grasp. The fingers of her free hand explored its folds, felt the unyielding bulk of the concealed derringer. Fire smouldered in the glance she shot at North's somber face. She tossed her head and snapped, "Well, swing—sucker!" With a flirt of her skirts she pivoted towards the door.

"Ain't you gonna talk t' me, Maggie?" bellowed a burly tracklayer. She swung round, flashed a smile at the crowded cages and raised a slim arm in salutation. The prisoners roared deep-voiced approval, and Maggie made her exit—true to style, thought North.

Alone once more, he resumed his seat on the thin straw mattress of the bunk. What was Maggie's game? If he had grabbed the gun she brought and made a break it would have been a clear-cut confession of guilt. Had she figured on that? Or did she believe him guilty? If so, her gesture must have been a spontaneous act of sympathy. He shook his aching head in bewilderment—who could fathom the motives of a woman?

CHAPTER V

IT WAS NOON before the sheriff's trail crossed Pearce's. He stumbled upon the Pinkerton man in the last place he would have sought him—The Bucket of Blood. The saloon exercised a peculiar fascination over Pat. Some deep intuition told him that within its sun-shrunk plank walls lay the key to Wizner's killing and the payroll looting. If Lerou framed Bill North, reasoned the sheriff, then he took a hand in the hold-up and why did Rolly Poulhi buzz around the saloon as persistently as a blowfly?

With no definite purpose in mind, the sheriff stepped through the ever-open doorway. After the blinding glare of the midday sun, the canvas-topped saloon appeared to be in semi-darkness. Pat stood for a moment or two inside the entrance while his eyes grew accustomed to the subdued light.

Business was apparently still on the down grade. A sprinkling of railroaders sat around the tables, vests unbuttoned and shirts open, guzzling beer and whisky. The long bare stretch of bar was broken by but one individual who stood at the far end chatting affably with a barkeep. Pat blinked as his eyes stared at the lone drinker. There was no mistaking Jake Pearce's thick-set figure and grey Stetson—the Pinkerton man at last!

Pearce raised a bottle and took a long pull as the sheriff approached. He turned, lips puckered in distaste. "Warm beer's the damnedest drink," he declared, "but the redeye they serve around here would burn a hole in boiler plate."

"Ever try water?" grinned Pat. "Gimme a slug of thet redeye," he told the barkeep, hooking his boot on the rail beside Pearce.

"Never," replied Pearce solemnly, "scared of rust!"

Pat poured his drink, tossed a coin

on the bar and nodded towards a nearby table. "I got something on my mind. Le's chin!" he suggested.

The other picked up his half-emptied beer bottle and they settled down at the table.

"Got a line on the payroll?" inquired Pat.

"Nope," grunted Pearce, "and not likely to unless North cracks."

"Jake!" said the sheriff slowly. "You done rounded up the wrong steer. Here's why!" In careful detail he told of the fracas in The Bucket of Blood, Maggie's virulence and Lerou's anger. Emphasized North's lack of incentive. Showed how simple it would have been to plant the spent shell.

Jake Pearce listened impassively. When Rolly's name was mentioned he showed a glimmer of interest. "So thet guy was ghostin' around?" he commented.

"I'll lay the hawg could tell plenty ef he spilled his guts," declared Pat.

The Pinkerton man chuckled deep in his throat. "You sure got the knife sharpened f'r Rolly. Mebbe he *was* peddling steers!"

The sheriff snorted.

Pearce carefully bit off the tip of a cigar, gripped it firmly in strong teeth and stared thoughtfully at the luminous canvas ceiling high overhead.

"Mebbe you're right about North," he conceded finally, "and ef he grabbed the coin he cached it somewheres around. We'll tail the jasper. If he cut down Wizner he'll mebbe put the rope around his own neck."

Pat grunted dissent.

"As f'r Lerou," continued the detective inperturbably, "yuh can't call him a rattlesnake, his blood's too danged hot. He'd nurse a grudge from here to hell. His record stinks—killing in Panama, knifing down San Antonio way, chased out of Chicago.

"Yep, like you say, he mighta held a hand." Pearce removed his cigar, closed his eyes and swallowed the remaining contents of the bottle. "Ugh!" he shuddered. "Gimme salts any time! Wal, I reckon you can spring North. Hadda hunch, when I pulled him in, the case was too damned simple." His ruddy face creased in a mirthless grin. "Guess I really gotta get working now."

UNSHAVEN, clothes wrinkled and lines of weariness etched upon his forehead, Bill North stepped out of the adobe jail—a free man. In front of the flat facade of the Courthouse he hesitated, touched his bristly chin irresolutely and angled across the street towards the nearest barber shop. Steam drifted from chinks in the battened bathhouse built against its rear.

Forty minutes later, bathed and shaved, he emerged. There was a decisiveness in his step and a sparkle in his eyes that had not been there before. He had thrown off every vestige of his brief sojourn in jail. Briskly, he strode along the plankwalk.

Sandwiched between a saloon and a photographer's, in the midst of the many joints that lined Main Street, a little square tin-roofed shack sat modestly back from view. Above the fly-curtain that screened the open doorway, a sign bore two words, HOMEMADE PIES. Inside the door, a plank counter spanned the narrow room. Tiers of shelves, carefully screened, rose against the rear wall. Behind the counter, when she was not busy baking in the sweltering rear kitchen, a calm young woman was to be found, heavy coils of wheat-colored hair neatly pinned around her head.

The only criticism men had of June Larsen was that her pies never lasted for more than ten minutes after she brought them crisp and fragrant from the double ovens of the big iron stove. This capable young person could have disposed of ten times her output without difficulty. As it was, at a dollar a pie, her receipts were not inconsiderable.

All the old-timers knew June. To them she was the one good thing left on Main Street. She was the only daughter of a nester [illegible] tail outfit on the edge of the Barrens, and scraped out a livelihood raising horses and grabbing whatever mave-

ricks wandered his way. Some claimed he was peculiarly near-sighted where brands were concerned. A year before Steel invaded the Valley, Oly Hansen had been stomped to death by an outlaw. The orphaned girl succumbed to the swift, impetuous courtship of Nels Larsen, former bronco-buster who rodded the Circle L—a barren hill spread. Nels was tougher than any bronc he ever broke and rumor said he applied the same methods to June. One night she rode into Dutch Springs and sent Doc Trimble's buckboard bouncing out to the Circle L. The Doc found Nels drunk, with a slug in his chest. The bronco-buster pulled through, claimed he was cleaning his gun... and gave town a wide berth. For awhile June worked as maid in The Jewel Hotel. There was sound sense behind her steady blue eyes, however, and she grasped opportunity when Steel brought a horde of hungry men into Dutch Springs. Now she was on her way to modest prosperity.

North brushed aside the fly-curtain with a sweep of his long arm and entered the pie shop, bending his head to clear the doorway.

"Out of stock, as usual!" he commented, with a grin, "and I'm dying for a slice of pie—real pie!"

June's eyes brightened at sight of the tall young railroader. "You're wrong," she smiled, bent down and slid a pie, browned to a nicety, from a shelf beneath the counter. North's gaze dwelt upon her firm, capable hands, the crisp gingham dress, travelled up to her cheeks rosy from the kitchen heat.

"You never forget, do you, June?" he said quietly.

"Naturally, I never forget my regular customers." The girl's voice was demure, but color tinged the clear contour of her cheeks.

"You almost lost this particular customer," said North, his voice tightening.

"Competition?" North overlooked the curious emphasis she placed on the word.

"Competition, heck! You've no competition! I was jailed, charged with killing Wizner." He told of his arrest. "Pat Stevens says it was a plant," he concluded. "He believes Lerou, who runs The Bucket of Blood, is behind it. That gentleman has cause to dislike me."

"Maggie Maloney!" said June quietly.

"You hit it," smiled North. "I told his fancy lady a few home truths."

"She likes you!" June compressed her lips, the words had sipped out unthinkingly.

North chuckled. "Like a boil!"

"Didn't she go to the jail to visit you?" North met the steady gaze of June's blue eyes. He laughed unconvincingly and inwardly cursed himself for omitting to mention the incident.

"Well, yes," he admitted lamely. "She did—how did you know?"

"She buys my pies too," returned June calmly. "One dollar please!"

North dropped a dollar into the girl's outstretched palm. His fingers closed on her hand. "Say, you're not angry, are you, June?" he demanded with a puzzled frown. "I wouldn't give a dollar for a dozen of that type."

The girl twisted her hand free and wheeled abruptly towards the kitchen. "Why should I be—you forget I've a husband," she commented placidly, without turning her head, and disappeared into the kitchen.

"You're separated, aren't you?" demanded North. No answer came from the kitchen. "Dammit!" he ejaculated and hit for the street, banged his head on the top of the door frame, ripped out a heartfelt oath, and gained the plankwalk.

The pie lay on the counter—forgotten.

SAM BREEZED into the sheriff's office around nine o'clock. "Train wreck in Coyote Cut," he announced with pious satisfaction. "Jest got it from the Yard." In common with every oldtimer, Sam resented the invasion of steel.

"How come?" inquired Pat absently. Sam's abrupt entrance had interrupted contemplation of a possible new angle to the payroll murder.

"Reckon a boulder rolled on the track, the hills is chock full of loose rock."

"Yep!" murmured the sheriff. Then his interest quickened. "What kind of a train?"

"Jest the usual kind—an engine hauls it, it runs on wheels," returned Sam innocently, too innocently.

"Quit acting smart!" advised Pat. "It warn't the payroll train by any mischance?"

Sam grasped the significance of the sheriff's remark. Inquiry gleamed in his eager eyes. "Say, yuh don't suppose—" he began .

"I gotta mighty strong hunch," grunted Pat. He rose, reached for his Stetson. "You go git Ezra. Meet yuh down the Yard, at the telegraph office."

Salmon hunched in the telegraph shack, a sheaf of messages on the table beside him, the key stuttering incessantly.

Pat stuck his head through the doorway. "What's this about a wreck?"

Without breaking the staccato symphony of his busy instrument, the ex-soldier threw back over his shoulder, "Pay train derailed in Coyote Cut. Engine pulled out with a breakdown gang an hour back. That damned payroll must be jinxed —I'm flat broke, too."

An engine wheezed to a stop in the glare of the flares outside. Pat saw a raw-boned man in overalls drop from the cab and head for the telegraph office at a run. He pushed past the sheriff at the doorway. "Feller found shot by the wreck!" His voice was taut with excitement. "Rocks piled on the track, and the payroll's gone! It's a hold-up!" He dropped a scribbled sheet on the counter. "Boss sez to get that out—right away. So-long! I gotta locate that Pinkerton guy." He hurried away.

Pat drifted around to the front of the shack. Down track two men, one tall, the other short, picked their way gingerly over the ties. The sheriff moved forward to meet them.

"It's a hold-up!" he rapped out. "The payroll's vamoosed again. Hoof it back to town. We're gonna ride —pronto!"

"We jest got heah," grumbled Ezra in disgust, "and he sez go back! Much more of this doggoned hoofin' and I'll be worn down to the size of this ornery little runt." He dropped a huge paw on the crown of Sam's shapeless Stetson.

"And mebbe you'll grow something besides maggots in thet think-pan of yourn," snapped Sam. "You shore act like a bull buffalo."

Jake Pearce's stolid form emerged into the lighted area. The train man, talking rapidly, walked beside him. The detective sighted Pat. "Get the bad news?" he shouted.

The sheriff nodded.

"Hop into the cab. I'm going out on the engine," invited Pearce.

Ezra's solitary eye brightened. "Mebbe we won't hev tuh leg back to town," he told Sam hopefully. But Pat shook his head. "Reckon we'll fork our bronks, Jake. Yuh can't trail none with an engine."

CHAPTER VI

THE TRIO AGAIN thumped along the plankwalk on Main Street. A pool of yellow light from two suspended lamps marked the entrance to The Bucket of Blood. Pat stopped. Ezra pulled up beside him and coughed hollowly. "Reckon I need tuh wash the trail dust otta my bellers," he explained.

"Ferget it!" grunted the sheriff. He knew the redhead's capacity for absorbing liquor. "You fellers hustle down tuh the livery barn and saddle up," he directed. "Throw the kak on my sorrel. Meet yuh right here—pronto." Ignoring Ezra's disgusted snort, he stepped inside the saloon.

News of the second hold-up had already seeped into town. A quick glance at the knots of men gathered along the bar told Pat that. The stern set of their features and the deep, serious mumble of their voices bespoke

serious discussion. The usual gaiety of Lerou's patrons was absent— mebbe, thought the sheriff, they were wondering if there ever would be another pay day.

And where was Lerou? Pat scanned the half-empty saloon. With a conscious feeling of disappointment, he sighted the proprietor's tall form by the side wall, behind the gambling tables. Although the distance was too great to observe the direction Lerou's gaze, Pat had a feeling that the hatchet-faced man was covertly watching every move he made.

The sheriff drifted across the sanded floor. Silky Selby was engrossed in a poker game, with two hard-faced easterners and Rolly Poulhi. Pat wandered aimlessly past the table, stopped, built a smoke, watched the game. Silky raised his eyes, swiftly scrutinized the visitor, dropped them back to his cards without change of expression. Rolls of fat buldged on Rolly's bull neck as the fat man discarded his hand, twisted his head around. He met the sheriff's blank gaze with a friendly grin. "Hear they lifted another payroll, sheriff," he announced cheerfully. "F'r gosh sakes, don't pin it on me. Silky here has been lifting my payroll." He chuckled gleefully.

Pat nodded and turned towards the door. Three of his suspects were accounted for. Looked like they had airtight alibis. But that didn't prove they hadn't taken a hand in the hold-up. There was clever planning behind these outrages. The brains in command could hire the tools.

Lerou threaded between vacant tables, as quickly and quietly as a cat. "Nothing wrong, sheriff, I hope?" he challenged, approaching, the set smile glued onto his thin features.

"Nothing I kin put my finger on," retorted Pat. He saw by the quick fire that burned in Lerou's restless eyes that the saloon man caught the double meaning. But Lerou's mechanical smile continued to funtion. "We always try to observe the law," he returned glibly.

Outside, Sam and Ezra were lounging against the hitch rail, smoking. Pat swung into the saddle and the three loped southward.

"How's the gang in The Bucket of Blood?" inquired Sam, as they left the garish honky-tonks behind and the ponies' hooves pounded upon the crumbling ruts of the wagon road.

"Like a bunch of cats thet just guzzled at the canary," replied Pat. "Lerou, Silky and Polly all got nice slick alibis—too danged slick!"

"Did yuh expect anything different?' rumbled Ezra.

AHEAD, THE shadowed bulk of Coyote Ridge rose out of the plain. A faint breeze rustled the dry prairie grass and the distant bellow of a cow soughed mournfully across the flat. Pat sniffed the pugent sage. The peace of the night took his thoughts back to the days before steel came to disrupt men's lives in Powder Valley. Sure there was plenty of action even then, but it was clean action.

The moon bathed the flats with cold radiance as the three angled towards the Cut. Smoke drifted from the stack of an engine on the grade. Its deadlight shone upon the dark figures of men hurrying back and forth.

Pat swung out of leather a stone's throw from the engine and knotted the sorrel's reins securely around the gnarled trunk of a squat oak. Sam and Ezra followed suit, and the three picked their way over the rock-littered ground beside the track, past another throbbing engine and flat cars, and strode between the confining slopes of the Cut.

By the wavering light of flares a breakdown gang was already working on the wreck. Pearce's heavy form materialized out of the confusion of toiling men. "Cleaned out every dollar," he announced unemotionally, "and killed two men. Two more bashed up, bad." He led the way to where the engine lay over-turned across the Cut, indicated the boulder-strewn track.

"The buzzards derailed the train, shot Kelly, one of the guards, blew the Express car and beat it," he explained laconically.

"Any witnesses?" asked Pat.

"Yep, we got a break there. Sampson, the fireman, hit the grit when he sighted a block ahead. Says he saw four masked men and guessed it was a hold-up. Busted his leg, but he had enough sense to lay doggo. If he hadn't, he'd be twanging a harp right now."

"Lamp anything worth while?"

"Saw 'em cut down Kelly and set a charge under the Express car. Watched 'em tote the payroll down the track and heard 'em gallop away."

"Thet all ?"

"I reckon so!" returned Pearce, with a shrug of disgust. "Nothing we couldn't have figured out for ourselves."

"This Sampson gent around?"

The detective jerked his head towards the end of the Cut. "Laid out in a flat car, with the others, and due to pull out any time."

"Guess I'll take a look at him," said the sheriff. Ezra and Sam were engrossed in the salvage operations. He left them staring wide-eyed and hurried back along the track.

Two motionless forms lay at one end of the first flat car—the bodies of the engineer and the murdered guard. Wrapped in blankets, two more men were stretched at the further end. Beside them, Pat picked out a third man, propped on an elbow, puffing a short-stemmed clay pipe.

"You Sampson?" The sheriff scrambled up on the car.

"That's my moniker," replied the smoker. His features, streaked with sweat and dust, glistened in the moonlight.

"How's the leg?"

"Plain hell, but it mighta been me neck!"

"You saw the hold-up?" Pat dropped down beside the injured fireman.

"That I did!" Sampson spat. "If I had a gun I'd have kilt the murderin' thieves."

"Yuh wouldn't know them again?"

The fireman shook his head. "They was masked, the varmints. Looked like ghosts, with white sacks over their heads."

Didn't sight a fat feller, waddled like a duck?"

Sampson glumly chewed the stem of his pipe. "They all moved mighty slick."

"Head east or west?"

The injured man's teeth bit into his pipe stem as he eased his roughly splinted leg. "I wouldn't know, I was that mad, with poor Nielson scalding to death in the cab. He laughed way back when I told him it was an omen."

"What was an omen?" demanded the sheriff quickly.

"The winking light, like an evil eye it was."

Pat was all attention. "Where, on the track?"

"Hell no—in the hills. Three times it winked. Nielson, I sez—"

"How far back did yuh see this winking eye?" cut in Pat.

Sampson regarded his leg somberly. "About five miles downtrack, I'd say."

"In the hills," mused Pat. Thet's where the rails skirt the foothills," He rose. "So long, Sampson, and good luck!"

STIRRUP TO stirrup, the three pards jogged back through the night to Dutch Springs. Sam, ever impatient, broke a long silence. "Wall, what's doin'? Or do we jest set and wait f'r the jaspers tuh ride in and say, 'Gimme a nice cell, thank you kindly!"

Pat fished out his watch, squinted at its face in the moonlight. "You git jest three hours shut-eye," he pronounced. "We'll loose Ezra on the trail at sun-up. Pack some biscuits and air-tights, and fill yore water bag. Who's squattin' on the old Circle L spread, since Nels pulled out f'r Arizona?" he concluded abruptly.

"June's ranch? Nobody's around there but pack rats, and whatinell's thet got to do with the hold-up?"

"Plenty," returned the sheriff. "Sampson, the fireman, saw a signal

lamp in the hills five miles down the track. Which is jest about the location of the Circle L. Now ef you was figgering on wrecking a train, which I wouldn't put beyond yuh—"

"Nor me!" rumbled Ezra.

"You'd wait 'til the right train breezed along," continued the sheriff. "Otherwise, you'd tip yore hand, tuh no purpose. So you'd plant a guy tuh keep cases, down track. When yore special train hit the track, this feller could tip yuh off. Git it?"

"I shore do!" muttered Sam. "The Circle L is close tuh steel. A lookout keeps cases on the track from the ranch house and gives the jaspers on Coyote Ridge the high sign. Then they got plenty time tuh plug the Cut."

"Ain't the runt bright!" boomed Ezra. "He kin figure most anything out—after yuh make it as plain as a a wart on yuhr nose."

Sam was too engrossed in the possibilities of Pat's suggestion to reply. "Then why don't we hit f'r the ranch?" he burst out finally.

"Because thet lookout vamoosed after he gave the signal. He'd be crazy tuh stick around. They's brains behind these stick-ups."

When the first beams of the rising sun gilded the rugged pinnacles of the Culebras, Pat and Sam lazed in their saddles, while Ezra, his pony ground-hitched, cast around the slopes below the dark gap of the Cut, half-bent, like a great shaggy bloodhound seeking scent. It is said that every human being is endowed with at least one talent. Ezra's was tracking. The big, unwieldly redhead could read more sign with his one eye than Pat and Sam, good trail men themselves, could between them with two eyes apiece. "It's the Apache blood in his veins," Sam was wont to say, when all other taunts failed to get under the big fellow's skin.

Ezra motioned with his arm, and the pair pricked their ponies into motion. "Five hawses tied here," he announced. "Hobbled too! They hit west, at a gallop. 'Pears like a button rode one. Look at his tracks!" The redhead was standing by a clump of brush in a slight depression. He pointed a thick forefinger to chafed branches and the sun-baked ground, scoured and chopped by ironshod hooves.

"What was the markin's on the the hawses?' inquired Sam slyly.

"Jest like yores," shot back Ezra. "Oversize ears, all same jackass."

"Let's go!" broke in the sheriff briskly.

Ezra forked his pony, dropped down a gully, then swung west. Eye focussed on the trail, he rode at a lope, occasionally pulling down to walking pace when they crossed a stretch of alkali or hit the boulders of a dry wash.

About two miles from the sceno of the wreck, he suddenly jerked to a stop, peeled out of leather and circled through the sand and sage. "One pulled off, right heah," he yelled. "Headed f'r town, a light-weight."

"Was he packin' the dinero?" Pat's grey eyes were eager.

Ezra ran a hand through his thatch of red hair and squinted feircely at the ground before him. "Nope," he decided finally. "'Twas on the lead pony. See," he indicated faint imprints, "the critter dug in plenty."

"I gamble that hairpin reported to Lerou," said Pat, as they drifted up beside the redhead. "Say, what was that you picked up in the sage?"

"Flour sack." Ezra held out a small, neatly rolled bundle, secured with a thong.

The sheriff shook out the white sack. Two small diagonal holes had been scissored, close to the bottom.

"A mask!" he ejaculated. "The hombre who hit for town dropped it." He sniffed the sack curiously, turned it inside out and made a careful examination. Pat regarded it." with puzzled eyes. Finally, he folded the makeshift mask and stowed it in a saddlebag.

"Let's ride!" he said crisply.

Ezra mounted and again led the way, steadily bearing westwards towards the mountains.

THROUGHOUT the morning hours, the sun bit through the shirts of the three and burned their backs as Ezra tenaciously followed the trail of the fleeing wreckers. They left the valley floor. The flat terrain swelled into rounded hills. In turn, these were left behind as the landscape changed. Behind them, the Valley had long since faded in the blue heat haze. The tufted grass thinned; scarcely patched the baked earth and at last disappeared entirely. The ponies' hooves rang upon bare ground, iron-hard from lack of moisture. A fine white dust haze drifted sluggishly behind them, powdered riders and ponies, stinging their eyes and prickling their nostrils.

Before them stretched the Barrens, a heat-blasted, waterless expanse of canyons and gulches, riven hills and rock-littered washes. Beyond towered the grim Culebras, tawny masses of rock, rising cliff upon cliff, pinnacle upon pinnacle, to naked peaks, chiselled black against the bright blue of the cloudless sky.

Ezra rode slowly now. Alkali gave place to rock. The three wound across barren benches and twisted through gloomy canyons. Again and again, the redhead came out of the saddle, searched around with shaggy head outthrust like a bird dog flushing quail. Finally, when the sun blazed high overhead, he pulled rein on the brim of a wide dish-like depression, crusted with gleaming alkali and specked with outcropping rock, like the surface of a petrified lake broken by the fins of giant fish.

For awhile he quartered the ground, afoot, then returned to his waiting pards with glum features. "Sign's most petered out, Pat. Seems like they split up right here. Which trail we gonna foller—ef any?"

"Yuh cain't hit the trail of the pack pony?" The flat tone of the sheriff's voice indicated he knew the answer.

Ezra slowly shook his head. "Rock don't leave much sign. They's three trails tuh foller, it's gamble which one hits the jackpot."

"Reckon we quit," said Pat. "Figgered they'd split afore this." He ran his tongue over dry lips, caked white with alkali dust. "Le's hunt a patch of shade amd feed our tapeworms."

Trail-stained, the trio jogged wordlessly through the dreary waste back towards Powder Valley. A sense of failure weighted their spirits. At last, the Barrens lay behind them. The ponies' hooves thudded upon yellowed grass, the ravines were green-veined with chaparral, pinons clothed the benches.

Pat pulled his hard-breathing sorrel to a halt as they topped a ridge. The three swung stiffly out of leather, loosened their dust-matted animals' cinches and rocked saddles. The sheriff pulled out the makin's, fashioned a smoke and eyed the the scene below.

At his feet, the foothills rolled smoothly, like waves of a sea. The Valley lay beyond, a vast dun bowl, quivering through rising heat waves. Far off, black smoke from a moving engine smudged the horizon. Idly, the sheriff's gaze wandered southward, towards Coyote Ridge. A drifting dust plume caught his eye. He stepped back to his browsing pony, slipped a spy-glass out of a saddlebag and focussed upon two ant-like figures crawling around the flank of a hill.

"Hey, Sam!" he called. "Take a looksee! They's two hombres down headin' for Dutch Springs. Where d'you figger they come from?"

The squat man grasped the glass.

"Ain't no place they could come from," he replied after long scrutiny, "except June Larsen's Circle L."

Recollection of the injured fireman's ill omen—the thrice-winking light, flashed into Pat's mind. "Hit leather!" he snapped. "We gotta head off them jaspers."

CHAPTER VII

AT THE PROSPECT of action, fatigue dropped the three-man posse like a discarded slicker. Cinches were quickly tight-

ened. Trailing Pat's sorrel, they dropped down the slope.

For thirty minutes, the three nursed every ounce of speed from their tired ponies, working through the hills on a course calculated to intercrpt the to riders heading for Dutch Springs.

Unexpectedly, the hard riding horsemen flushed their quarry at the mouth of a brushy ravine. Crashing down through the undergrowth, they emerged into a narrow grassy valley, down the center of which two riders were ambling leisurely.

"Lookee!" gasped Sam, in quick surprise. "One on the near side is a woman, ridin' sidesaddle."

Reining down to a trot, the three fanned out and cut across towards the suspects. The woman stared straight ahead. Beyond her, the man raised an arm in careless salutation and seemed in no wise perturbed.

"Glencourt and his lady friend," murmured Pat. "Looks like we hit a blind trail."

The Assistant Paymaster reined up at their approach. His eyes ran over their dust-powdered garb and sweated ponies. "Greetings, sheriff!" he hailed cheerfully. "You fellows seem a little shopworn, so to speak. Returning from an arduous man-hunt, I presume?"

"Another payroll lifted," returned the sheriff, reining up ahead of the pair. He watched Glencourt's pasty features closely.

Quick surprise registered on the young fellow's face, his jaw dropped in astonishment. Then his wide mouth quirked in a grin. "Saved my bacon, by jove! Bill North threatened to flay me alive if I didn't turn up this morning to help dole out the dollars. He chuckled gleefully. His expression changed at a sudden thought. "They didn't—kill Bill?"

Doubt clouded Pat's grey eyes as he watched Glencourt lolling easily in the big stock saddle. Either the dissipated young easterner was an ace actor or he was innocent of complicity in the holdup.

"Warn't you in town last night?" queried the sheriff.

The girl spoke for the first time. Her voice was sharp. "Don't answer his impertinent questions, Jeff, it's none of his damned business."

Pat's gaze flicked in her direction. Blondy had been beautiful—once before the excesses of dance-hall life had marred her. Devoid of make-up, her features were well-molded. A thick mane of hair, as yellow as the sun-dried bunch grass, hung in a long braid down her back. A tight-buttoned bodice confined her generous curves. But the revealing sunlight was unkind to Blondy.

As the sheriff's searching gaze dwelt upon the flesh sagging beneath her chin, the faint wrinkles etched around her eyes and the traces of grey at the roots of her hair, he was reminded of a rose—full blown and fading fast.

"Blondy's right, sheriff," rejoined Glencourt, a trifle uncertainly. "It really is none of your business."

"I asked if you were in town last night," reiterated the sheriff emphatically.

Glencourt fidgetted uneasily in his saddle, glanced appealingly at the girl's frigid features. "It's a beastly embarrassing question," he evaded.

LONG HOURS on the trail had rasped the sheriff's temper. From neck to buttock, his skin itched and burned from the powdered alkali dust, his throat felt as though it were lined with cinders, his eyes were reddened from the sun glare. "See here, mister!" His voice was flinty. "The pay train was wrecked last night, two fellers killed and smashed up. Ef you had been around town, you'd know it. Ef you were out of town, you're a suspect—and thet spells hoosegow."

"Oh, fiddlesticks!" burst out the young man defensively. "I was miles away. I spent the night at the Circle L ranch house." Then, conscious of the implications of his admission, he cleared his throat apologeticaly, and stared studiously at his pony's ears.

"You got a witness, too!" commented the sheriff ironically.

Blondy sniffed.

Pat rasped his chin, eying the discomfitted Glencourt. "I reckon we'll take you two in," he decided finally.

"You can't get away with it, you hick sheriff!" shrilled the girl, pale cheeks reddening with anger. "I got friends. You can't pick on us, we never did nothing, and you know it. You haven't got the savvy to catch a cold, so you railroad the first persons you meet. We was never near Coyote—" She checked abruptly, with quick indrawn breath. Brittle silence enveloped the group.

"Did I say the wreck was in Coyote Cut?" queried the sheriff gently.

Lips tight-pressed, bosom rising and falling beneath the tight-fitting bodice with repressed emotion, the girl sat motionless. "I heard the crash," admitted sulkily.

"And guessed it was a holdup, so yuh walked outside with a stable lantern for a looksee!" Derision rode the sheriff's tones. He kneed his pony and wheeled beside Glancourt. "Reckon we'll hit f'r town." He turned his head. "You tail us, with the gal," he shouted to his pards, "and drop back aways."

By the time the cavalcade reached the scattered tents that mushroomed around the fringes of town, the sheriff had wormed Glencourt's story out of him—or the story he chose to tell. It was so simple and sordid, and so plainly reflected the weak-wiled Assistant Paymaster's character, that it sounded like the truth. Glencourt claimed to have obtained permission from June Larsen to use the Circle L until the construction camp moved on. He maintained it as a nest in which to entertain his lady friend. The precious afternoon they had hired ponies at the livery barn and rode out. They had seen no one. He had not the slightest inkling that anything untoward had occurred and was escorting his lady friend homeward when he met the posse. "Blondy's a good girl at heart," explained Glencourt. "She's just the victim of unfortunate circumstances. she detests that dance-hall crowd. I leased the ranch so that we could get away from it all—together."

Touching, thought Pat, and very plausible....if Blondy hadn't let the cat out of the bag. Just how much did Glencourt really know of the holdup? Had the girl hogswiggled him? He was either a jackass or a danged clever coyote.

FROM THE corner of his eye, the sheriff saw one of the loungers, hunkered in the shade of The Bucket of Blood's high prank front, jerk hastily to his feet and scuttle through the entrance of the saloon as the dusty knot of riders jogged down Main Street. So Lerou had a lookout posted, pondered Pat. More proof he was linked up with the hold-up.

Sam and Ezra walked the ponies back to the livery barn while Pat escorted his two suspects to the little leanto office.

Jake Pearce was set solidly in a straight-backed chair, chewing a cigar. His gaze lingered on Blondy, but he made no comment as Pat herded the pair before him.

"Watch the young lady, Jake!" admonished Pat, sliding open a desk drawer and picking up a ring of keys. "I gotta make this get comfortable."

"I say!" protested Glencourt, as the sheriff steered him outside and flung open the jail door. "You can't do this! I know nothing of the beastly holdup. I demand a lawyer—immediately!"

"You ain't arrested—yet!" drawled Pat. "Jest protective custody. I'll spring yuh in thirty minutes, mebbe." With this spare consolation, he pushed the bewildered young man into a cell and clanged the door shut.

The air in the small office was blue with cigar smoke and stifling from the sun's rays that beat on the tin roof. Pat set the door ajar and plunked down in his swivel chair. Blondy sat as far away from Pearce as possible, tight-lipped and stiff-backed.

"Looks like you caught a canary," commented Pearce pleasantly.

"Yep, and she's gonna sing ef she

craves tuh keep out of a cage," returned Pat shortly. Briefly, he told the Pinkerton man of the signal light that flashed from the vicinity of the Circle L, to warn the wreckers that the pay train was going through, of the couple's overnight trip to the ranch, and the girl's involuntary admission that she knew of the hold-up.

"There was no way she could hear about that wreck," he summed up. "I'm staking my star that she was in cahoots with the wreckers and lit thet lantern." He eyed Blondy's pale features, now taut with tension. "You come clean and we'll ease you outta this tight spot. Ef not—" he paused significantly.

"You dumb flatfeet would arrest a parson to make a showing," flashed the girl. "You dribble plenty of words, but they mean nothing to me. Jeff will bear me out we never left the ranch."

"You knew the train was wrecked?" accused the sheriff.

"I heard a crash, if that's what you mean."

"And guessed it was the pay train?" said Pat caustically.

"That's just it, now make something out of it, " she rejoined tartly.

The sheriff sighed. He hated to be tough with a woman. Abruptly he changed his line of attack.

"Nice little hideout you and Glencourt got holt of," he commented.

"We like it!"

"Howcome you got the notion tuh ride out yesterday?"

"Jeff wanted to get away from town."

"North wanted him tuh stick around because he'd need him bad on pay day."

Blondy shrugged indifferently.

"And Glencourt says you was dead set on riding out to the Circle L."

The door moved slightly, but no breeze stirred the heat-burdened air.

The girl tossed her head. "Maybe it was my idea, so what?"

"Plenty!" returned Pat grimly. Silently, he gathered his long legs beneath his chair. Without warning, he leapt headlong for the door. It flew open from the impact of his shoulder. He caught a glimpse of a fast moving leg vanishing around the corner of the shack and plunged after it.

A WAGON, its team tied to a wheel, was drawn up beside the Courthouse. The pursuing sheriff caught a fleeting glimpse of the eavesdropper as he dodged behind the wagon. Before Pat could round the vehicle, his quarry had mingled with the stream of men moving back and forth along the plankwall.

Breathing heavily, the sheriff returned to the office, slammed the door shut behind him. "Missed the coyote!" he grunted to Pearce.

"Who rods the hold-up gang—Lerou?" He swung round towards the silent Blondy, firing the question as he turned.

"You should know—you're sheriff," returned the girl coolly.

Jake Pearce, previously a silent spectator, cut in. "Lemme ask a few questions, Pat. You see, I know Blondy."

The girl's head jerked in his direction. "Plenty know me," she sneered. "I'm real popular around this burg."

Pearce eyed the smoke curling slowly from the tip of his cigar "Wal," he murmured. "This was way back. You went under the moniker of Kitty Newton in those days. Feller by the name of William Bardsley, lived in Kansas City, got tangled up with you. Poisoned his wife and swung for it. You skipped out."

"It's a lie, you're crazy!" Blondy's eyes distended, the blood drained from her pale face.

"Maybe I am, but I knew I'd seen your face somewheres—it was on a reward dodger. There's a warrant out for Kitty Newton. I recollect the description said she carried a purple birthmark on the back of her neck." His voice hardened, his eyes probed the tensed faced Blondy. "Maybe that's why you wear your hair down. Want I should take a look at your neck?" He rose ponderously and crossed the room towards her.

Blondy threw up her hands in sudden terror, striving to ward him off. "No, no, no!" she shrieked. Her

jaunty self-assurance was gone, swept away by a storm of tears. Pearce returned to his seat. The two men eyed her silently as she slumped in her chair, her body shaken by unrestrained sobbing.

Heck of a business, thought Pat, but the lure of payroll gold had killed three men and it looked like this dance-hall jade held the key to the killings.

Blondy gradually regained self-control, and her sobbing quietened. Pearce spoke again, his voice cold and emotionless. "Come clean and we'll forget Kitty Newton. If not, well, I reckon they'll send you down for ten years on that poison count."

"All right, flatfoot, you win!" Blondy's voice was dead as her reddened eyes. "Sure, I was the lookout. Jeff was dead drunk in the shack. I—" A shadow darkened the unwashed window behind the sheriff. The girl shrank back in quick terror. Pat whirled as a gun roared almost in his ear and glass tinkled. Blondy pitched forward. Both men plunged for the door. It was secured on the outside. They flung their bodies against it. The stout timbers creaked, but did not yield. Pat snatched out his gun, turned to the smashed window, knocked out the remaining glass. glass. Pearce hoisted him through, head foremost. He hit the ground on all fours, scrambled to his feet, gun in hand. Nothing moved on the flat stretch of ground behind the Courthouse,

Slapping his .45 back into leather, the chagrined sheriff turned to examine the door. The handle was securely roped to a hasp, driven in at some time in the past for a padlock. He sawed through the rope with his Barlow knife and Jake Pearce stepped out, the butt of a cigar still clenched in his teeth.

The detective grinned humorlessly, "Outguessed us!"

Pat moved past him and bent over the girl's crumpled form. "Dead before she hit the floor," grunted Jake.

"Two more minutes and we'd have had the goods on Lerou," said Pat dourly. "I'm gonna brace him."

Boiling inwardly, he headed for The Bucket of Blood. There was no sign of the hatchet-faced man on the floor of the saloon. At the far end of the bar a door gave admittance to a small room he used as a private office. Without ceremony, Pat kicked open the door and strode in.

Lerou was seated at a table in the center of the room. Behind him, a safe bulked against the wall. Lithographs of race horses decorated the plank walls. A closet was built into one corner. There were no other furnishings, save two straight-backed chairs.

The saloon man's head jerked up when Pat barged in. From long habit, the stock smile masked his features, but the sheriff read veiled caution in his hooded eyes.

"Nothing wrong I hope, sheriff!" Lerou's high-pitched voice was almost a whine.

"Plenty!" snapped Pat. Blondy spilled her guts!"

Lerou flicked up the lid of a cigar box on the table before him and fumbled for a smoke. The diamonds set in his finger rings danced and sparkled. Scared, thought the sheriff.

"Blondy?" The saloon man's voice was puzzled. "Oh, one of my girls!" He spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "What can I do about it? That blonde, she lies like a greaser!"

"Not about the wreck in Coyote Cut!"

"Blondy mixed up in that affair!" Lerou's voice reflected incredulity.

"She's not the only one—she put the finger on you, Lerou!"

The saloon man jumped to his feet, his chair crashing backward. The set smile was wiped off his face. His eyes sparked with anger. Thin lips were drawn tight against his teeth. "What do you mean?" he choked "What could I have to do with a train wreck? That blonde floosie's word isn't worth a damn." He padded swiftly towards the door. "Where is the hell-cat? I'll make her eat her words."

"Cut the playacting," drawled Pat.

"She won't talk no more, and you know it."

"She'll talk plenty," raged Lerou, "when I kick her out into the street."

For the first time, doubt stirred in the sheriff's mind. Either Lerou was staging a masterly act, or he was innocent. Blondy could have been working with another gang. Anyway, his bluff had not worked and he didn't have a shred of proof to back up his suspicions.

He rose, shouldered indifferently past the saloon-keeper and moved outside, carefully pulling the door shut behind him. The door closed, he froze, hand still on the knob. Then he flung it open again, thrust his head inside. Lerou stood frowning at the wall. In a flash the frown was replaced by the stock smile.

"Did you forget something?" he inquired smoothly, eyes mocking the poker-faced Pat.

"Yep. Send Blondy a wreathe—at least you owe her thet!"

With this, he closed the door and turned away. There was the smallest doubt in his mind regarding Lerou's guilt. If only he had some proof. And the proof was locked behind Blondy's lifeless lips.

Glittering with sequins, white arms bare and black dress cut low, Maggie Maloney sailed the saloon, her bold eyes smiling a greeting.

The sheriff was in no mood for Maggie's pleasantries. With a curt nod, he headed for the entrance. But Lerou's fancy lady circled a table and planted herself squarely in his path.

"Say, sheriff, you look all tuckered out!" Her husky voice was low, sympathetic. "Have a drink on the house!"

"Too busy tuh stick around, lady." Pat sniffed. "Say, thet's a swell brand of scent!"

Maggie's lips parted in a lazy smile.

"Thanks for the compliment! It's Odor d'amour. I get it special from New York."

"I gamble there ain't a gal around heah kin get scent like that!" Pat had regained his affability.

"I should say not, they wouldn't pay the price."

"I wouldn't think so," agreed the sheriff. "It shore is different. Goodday ma'am!"

When he emerged from The Bucket of Blood, a light shone in his eyes like that of a prospector who unexpectedly hits a rich vein. Lady Luck was surely a fickle jade—with one hand she crowned a feller with a club, with the other she handed him a prize package.

CHAPTER VIII

THE HOTEL WAS quiet when Pat slipped out of his room and jingled down the threadbare carpet of the stairway. Eastward, pale fingers of light groped uncertainly across the grey sky. The sheriff had a well-confirmed faith in hunches—and, lying abed, a hunch hit him that Nels Larsen's deserted ranch house might repay inspection.

Back of the livery barn, a bunch of ponies drifted around the pole corral. The early morning air was chilly, but the sheriff was thoroughly warmed up by the time he succeeded in dabbing a loop on his sorrel.

He led the pony into the barn. Threw on the saddle.

A feminine voice startled him as he bent, fingering the latigo through the cinch ring. "Well, well, sheriff, this is a surprise! I thought I was the only early bird."

He jerked erect, peering around in the wavering light of a stable lamp he had hung on a peg.

"Mrs. Larsen! What, no pies today!" There was appreciation in Pat's grey eyes as they took in the girl's well-knit figure. June Larsen was dressed in typical rider's garb—denims tucked into spurred riding boots, a checked shirt, even a gunbelt buckled around her slim waist. Her hair was gathered beneath a wide-brimmed Stetson. The sheriff knew well that she was as coolly capable as she looked.

"No payroll, no buyers!" she laughed. "The town's flat broke. Anyway, I need a day off. Thought

I'd ride up to the ranch. I've almost forgotten what a saddle feels like."

Pat chuckled, nodded at the gun bumping against her leg. "Prepared f'r anything, eh?"

The girl's firm lips tightened. "If you were a woman, sheriff, you'd know I need to be. When some of these big-wolves take a few drinks, anything with long hair is fair game."

She led a pinto from a stall, waved Pat back when he proffered assistance, smoothed a folded blanket across the animal's back and lifted down her saddle.

"Going my way?" she inquired, adroitly swinging the saddle across the pony's back.

"All the way!"

"Say, that's dandy!" June's voice was muffled as she stopped to grab the swinging cinch.

"'Pears like yore spread is tied in with these hold-ups."

She straightened, with an amazed gasp. "The Circle L. But—it's deserted!"

Briefly, he told her of the signal lantern and Blondy's unintentional confession of duplicity.

"Did this woman implicate the gang?" asked June, wide-eyed.

"Nope, they rubbed her out before she spilled her g—spilled the beans," corrected the sheriff hastily. "But I gotta hunch there's been shenanigans around yore old spread."

THE GIRL SET a neatly booted foot into a stirrup and swung into leather. Together, they clattered over the loose planks of the barn floor and jogged along deserted Main Street.

June set spurs to her pony as soon as the main part of Dutch Springs lay behind. The wiry pony stretched out in wild gallop—head stretched forward, hooves pounding, tail flying. Swinging easily in the saddle, the usually composed June Larsen yippied and shouted in great glee. Thundering in her wake, the sheriff smiled in sympathy—he could appreciate how she felt after endless days before a hot stove.

The girl reined down her panting pony and turned to greet Pat as he pulled abreast. Her cheeks were glowing, her eyes afire with life, she inhaled lungfuls of the crisp air. It's just wonderful to get away from that —madhouse," she cried.

"Guess pie-baking does get kinda wearisome."

"Wearisone! I hate it!" she returned vehemently. "I sometimes envy even those dance-hall girls, with their jewels, and dresses and good times." Then abruptly she stopped, her tone changed. "I'm talking like a locoed fool!" she said apologetically. "It must be the air—it's like wine!"

Ahead, the brown hills, dark seamed by ravines, rolled down to meet the plain. Cottontails frolicked in the mesquite. A black bear lumbered through the pinon that clothed a draw, with a casual backward glance at the two interlopers. Squirrels chittered and scurried up tree trunks as the riders followed a cow path that looped around the flank of a ridge.

Impulsively, the girl slipped her gun out of the holster, clicked back the hammer and threw down on a squirrel squatting on a dead branch, twenty paces distant. Her pinto pitched as the gun roared, but the little furry animal, mashed to a pulp by ravines, rolled down to meet the ground.

June shrieked with joy, then turned her head quickly to meet the sheriff's sober eyes.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" she jerked out in quick recrimination. "The poor thing. As I told you, I'm just crazy this morning!"

"Let it pass!" Pat smiled at the tragedy in her blue eyes. "It was a danged good shot."

Two hours later, the pair, threaded through a growth of aspens in a shadowed draw. Through the slim tree trunks the Circle L ranch house stood plain, on a bench, high above the valley. This was no deserted ranch, decided Pat, eyes on the trail. The earth, damp beneath the trees, showed the impress of many hooves. The sheriff mentally flayed himself

for failing to bring Ezra along. The red-thatched rider would have read the story those tracks told like a newspaper. Mebbe the pay-train wreckers had doubled back and rode this way.

Behind the ranch rose the slope of a hill, criss-crossed with cowpaths. Below, the terrain dripped in a succession of lightly timbered benches to the flat floor of the far-flung plain. Ravines, bright green with chaparral, twisted around the spread. Spruce and pine thrust their heads high.

As the riders pulled out of the timber, the sheriff eyed the Larsen ranch with growing interest. Long and low-built, the house was timbered, chinked with mud. Small square windows were cut in its walls. In the rear stood a weathered horse barn. Holes gaped in its roof, the door hung askew upon rawhide hinges. Flanking it were two small corrals, connected by a chute. In a gully below the house, a small spring had been dammed with logs, through which a pipe had been driven.

A thin stream of water splashed musically from the pipe's end into a barrel below.

June slipped out of the saddle before the long, slender trunk of a pine set upon two stumps, that served as hitch rail. She quickly knotted the reins around the pine and hastened towards the house. Pat loosened the cinches of the two ponies and followed. He stepped through the open door into a rudely furnished living room with beaten earth floor. An empty whisky bottle, with two unwashed glasses, stood on a square table, beside a glass-bowled lamp. Pelts of mountain lion and coyote were tacked to the walls. Before a circular iron heating stove a dusty bearskin was spread on the floor. Two wooden rockers and several straight-backed chairs completed the furnishings. In one corner a litter of saddlery gathered dust.

Doors at either end were closed. Pat surmised they led to bedrooms. He glimpsed a kitchen stove in the rear room.

JUNE'S STETSON lay on a chair. On the smooth floor beside the chair the sheriff noticed an amber colored bone hairpin. Idly, he bent, picked it up and lait it on the hat. The girl's disgusted voice sounded from the kitchen. "As I expected! Dirty dishes!" She came to the doorway with a bucket and held it smilingly to the sheriff.

"You're deputized! Tote a bucket of water from the spring. It's below the house."

Pat returned with the water. "Now you investigate," ordered June, "and I'll clean house."

The sheriff watered the ponies and tied them in the shade of the trees. Then he rolled a smoke and hoisted himself onto the hitch rail, gazing over the vally, outspread below like a map. A glittering strand of silver, the rail track stretched across the yellowing plain. Out of the haze-shrouded range land to his left rose the dark flanks of Coyote Ridge. With his glass, Pat scanned the long, undulating line of its crest and picked out the square notch that was the Cut.

Simplest thing in the world, he ruminated, to watch the rail track below from the house and flash a signal when the pay train steamed down valley. But his job was to find the loot.

He slid off the pole, crossed to the ponies and stowed his glass away. First, he climbed through the poles of the nearer corral and walked over the roughened ground, scarred with hooves and thick with grey dust. No sign of digging here. Neither the chute nor the other corral gave promise. He peered into the horse barn. Three stalls at the back were heaped high with hay. The sheriff sighed, for the sun was high and the barn stank with manure. He picked up a fork and commenced pitching hay out of the nearest stall. The third and last stall was emptied and Pat was wet with sweat when June's calm voice sounded from the door. The girl's earlier exhilaration had

evaporated and she had regained her customary casual calm.

"Coffee's ready—and a pie! That's the best I can do!"

The sheriff straightened his aching back and set the fork against the wall. "It's a feast!" he assured her wholeheartedly.

"Any—clues?"

"Not a sniff! Except dung—fresh too! Someone's been around. Lookat thet!" He dolefully indicated the towering pile of hay. "I pitched thet out of the stalls and got nothing but exercise!"

Comfortably filled, Pat relaxed in a kitchen chair, made a smoke and lazily watched June wash the dishes.

"Staying long?" she inquired.

"'Til sundown, I reckon," grunted the sheriff. "Figger on combing the spread. I still gotta notion the gold's hereabouts."

The girl's smooth brow wrinkled in perplexity. "Why should they pick the Circle L? There are a thousand hiding places around these hills."

Pat sucked his cigarette meditatively. "Wal, they's plenty sign under the aspens and the galoots posted a lookout right here. I gamble my hunch ain't far off the target."

"There's a reward for recovery of the loot, isn't there?"

"Enough to put the guy who noses it out on Easy Street. Wanna help me—fifty-fifty?"

June laughed. "No sirree! This is my day off. I'm heading back to town, anyway, just as soon as I get through these dishes."

"I ain't driving yuh away?" Pat spoke with sudden compunction.

"No!" returned the girl decisively. "I just don't want to stick around. This place brings back too many—memories."

Recollection of the abrupt and violent split-up between tough-fibered Nels and his attractive young wife restrained the sheriff from further urging.

BALANCED IN the saddle with careless grace, June disappeared in the shadows of the aspens. Left alone, the sheriff went to work again. In a corner of the kitchen ceiling he had noticed a square aperture that gave admittance to an attic above. He pushed the table beneath the opening and climbed upon it. Head protruding through the hole, he examined the attic. It was apparent at a glance that there was no loot hidden there. On either side the roof sloped down to the plank floor. At each end, an opening about two feet square allowed free curculation of air. A swarm of hornets had built their nest in one corner, attaching it, like an earthen football, to a rafter. Like specks of gold, they hovered in the sunlight. At the other end, a chipmunk was perched on the window ledge, bushy tail erect, watching Pat with bright, beady eyes. sight of the little aimal brought the episode of June and the slaughtered squirrel into the sheriff's mind. Such wanton cruelty didn't seem like June, he thought. After all, it was no worse than knocking down a jack-rabbit. Still, it didn't set just right.

Pat jumped down and pulled the table back into place. Then he began examining the beaten earth floor, kicked aside the bearskin, and glanced under the brass beds. But everywhere the hard-packed earth was undisturbed.

Where next? He leaned against the frame of the front doorway, questioning eyes roaming over his surroundings. Mentally, he put himself in the bandits' boots. If he had a sack of loot, where would he cache it? First thing would be to hit a hiding place that could be quickly found, night or day, if it were necessary to move the spoils in double-quick time. Then it would have to be a spot where some long-nosed maverick wouldn't stumble on it by accident. His glance fell upon the water barrel, set below the timber dam. He had seen that before, a year back, when he rode up to quiz Nels about a stolen horse. Like June's father, the broncobuster was never over-particular about a brand. It was the

same barrel, yet it looked different. "How could it be different?" Pat argued mentally, "If it was the same?" In a flash the solution jolted him—then it was buried midway in the soggy soil. Now it was set on the surface. A growing excitement stirred his blood. He ducked beneath the pine hitch pole and dropped hastily down grade towards the spring. Why had that barrel been moved?

ANKLE DEEP in mud, he stood beside it. It was filled to the brim, the water seeping steadily over its moss-greened sides, as it splashed down from the pipe above.

Grasping the slippery edge with both hands, the sheriff tried to rock the barrel, but it was set firm, weighted by its contents. A thick fence post lay by the dam. Pat pushed one end into the mud beneath the barrel, he glimpsed the top of a bulging leather sack. As feverishly excited as a prospector who has located a rich knees in the water, dug into the mud with eager fingers....hoisted up a weighty pay sack. His eyes shone. The hunch had paid out. He groped in the muck, yanked out sack after sack heavy with coin and piled them in a muddied heap beside him.

He was down to his armpits, soaked with water plastered with yellow clay, groping for more golden treasure, when the sharp, metallic click of a cocked gun reached his ears. He froze, every nerve taut.

"Stretch mister—and stretch fast!" rasped a cold voice.

Slowly, the sheriff stood up, raised mud-coated hands shoulder high. Three men stood around him, each with a levelled gun. White flour sacks covered their heads and masked their features. Through triangular slits he could see their eyes, dark and wary. They were clothed in riders' garb—grey shirts, denim pants and spurred boots.

The nearest reached forward with his left hand, swiftly unbuckled Pat's gunbelt. It plomped into the mud. Then he prodded the sheriff roughly with the muzzle of his forty-five and strike, the sheriff dropped to his inclined his head in the direction of the house.

"Rattle yore hocks!" he growled.

The barrel nudging his backbone, Pat climbed the slope on lagging feet, his captors tailing him. Behind, they left the pile of yellowed sacks, dripping water, beside the overturned barrel.

As he trudged over the rough turf, Pat inwardly cursed his carelessness. It stood to reason, he told himself bitterly, that they'd have a lookout posted, to keep cases on the loot. Probably spied on him all morning and laid doggo until he hit the jackpot. What would their next move be?

The hard barrel of the six-gun, insistently digging into his flesh through the soddened shirt, was a vicious reminder.

CHAPTER IX

A HUNDRED PACES spanned the distance from the spring to the ranch house. To the discomfitted sheriff, with the chilly nudge of steel at his back, it seemed a mile.

Pat's paramount feeling was anger; anger that he had allowed himself to be surprised and captured so tamely—and at the moment of triumph. Swiftly, he calculated his chances of pulling out alive. The masked men who plodded silently behind him could have cut him down with ease at the spring. The fact that they had not gave him hope for survival. Hard cases, he figured, but not imported killers. Likely some of the rustling fraternity Lerou had cut in to handle the rough stuff. Holdups, horse stealing, gun fighting were all in their day's work, but the code of the range forbade shooting a man in the back. They'd have no compunction in putting him out of business, though, if they decided his continued existence endangered their lives.... and they walked in the shadow of the noose!

The slow moving procession reached the ranch house. Prodded by the gun barrel, the sheriff stepped inside, crossed the living room and

entered the kitchen. When he came up against the wall, he turned and coolly looked the three masked men over, seeking signs of identification. There was little to help him in the dusty range duds visible below the loose-hanging sack-masks. Each wore a coarse shirt, dark pants stuffed into riding boots, as did a hundred other punchers. Only one "marker" did the sheriff file away in his mind —the soft leather upper of one right boot had been ripped and the ragged edges were clumsily laced together with a rawhide thong.

"Rest yore laigs!" growled the gun wielder, pushing forward a chair with his foot. Pat sat down. One of his captors ducked into the next room. The sheriff heard him foraging among the pile of discarded saddlery. He returned, several rawhide thongs dangling from his hand.

In a trice, the seated sheriff's wrists were pinioned behind his back, and his legs lashed to the chair legs. Roped as securely as a hogtied calf, he was left alone while the three bandits moved into the next room, slamming the door behind them.

"What next?" thought Pat wryly. He flexed the tight-bound thongs around his wrists, but the tough rawhide cut deeper into the flesh. His legs were immovable, tightly splinted to the chair.

The deep mumble of voices, punctuated with crisp oaths came from the adjoining room. Abruptly, the discussion ceased. Spurs jingled and died away into distance....Pat heaved a sigh of heartfelt relief. He had steeled himself for a quick trip to the Pearly Gates.

For awhile, he sat motionless—listening. A heel-fly bumped against the little square window, chipmunks chattered in the attic overhead. Then he felt, rather than heard, the faint thud of horses' hooves. "The sidewinders have vamoosed with the coin," he murmured under his breath. "I gotta get outta this."

The straightback chair was old and ricketty, its glued joints loose from long exposure to the dry air. Tensing his muscles, feet solidly braced against the floor, the sheriff pressed backwards. The chair-back creaked, snapped off with a sharp crack and slid from beneath his pinioned arms to the floor. Two vicious kicks and the legs broke off, pitching the helpless sheriff onto his face. A splintered chair-leg lashed to each shin, he rolled over. Struggled to his feet.

June Larsen had dropped the cutlery into a shallow box beside the stove. Arms tight bound behind him, Pat crossed to the box and eyed an assortment of knives, forks and spoons. Bending, he dug for a butcher knife with his teeth. After several ineffectual attempts, he gripped the bone handle firmly and straightened, eyes darting around. Where to wedge it?

He moved towards the door, sank on his knees, dropped the knife. Stretching his jaws to the utmost, he slid his lips over the door handle. It was a bulky mouthful, but he made it. Gripping hard, he twisted his head, levered back the catch and inched the door open.

Again he dove for the knife. His teeth gritted on the steel blade. He thrust the handle between door and jamb, shouldered the door tight upon it and slowly worked to his feet, weight thrown against the door to hold the knife in place.

At last he stood erect, blocked the door hard against the knife handle with his foot and backed against the protruding blade. With a seesaw motion, he rasped the rawhide thongs that bit into his wrists across the knife edge. It was a finicky job, with nothing but the feel of the blade to guide him. At the first attempt, the knife tip jabbed deep into his right hand. He winced from the pain, felt the warm rush of blood, gritted his teeth and tried again. Blood spattered to the floor as he sawed back and forth. With a faint twang the rawhide parted. Pat shook the lashings off and swung his arm free. Quickly, he tore a strip from his bandana and bandaged his bleeding hand. Then he severed the thongs that secured the fragments of the broken chair to his legs.

Free at last, he slid into the living room and peered cautiously through a window. Apparently, the spread was deserted. His sorrel browsed peacefully beneath the trees.

The sun had sunk behind the hills that bulged behind the ranch, shadowing the path that wound down to the spring.

For a few moments the sheriff stood gazing, and pondering. If the raiders had left a lookout, a bullet might greet him the instant he stepped out. But it would be a full hour before darkness would veil his movements—and he had a hunch his captors were far away. He made his decision—threw the door open and dashed for the spring, zig-zagging like a jack-rabbit as he raced downhill. But no roaring gun splashed lead. Panting, he reached the spring, foundered in the mud beneath the dam. His gunbelt lay where it had fallen, wet and clay-daubed, but the gold had gone.

Pat hit for the house again. Cleaned and reloaded his gun. That done, with the comforting feel of the gunbelt about his middle, he breathed more easily.

The shadows were thickening fast. Across the vast dim bowl that was the plain below an engine's headlight crawled slowly, like a great firefly. Pat tightened the sorrel's cinches, mounted and headed for Dutch Springs.

IT WAS NIGHT when he rode between the flaming fronts of Main Street. Sam and Ezra were hunched on either side of the desk in the lean-to office, a cribbage board between them.

"Bite on thet!" rumbled the redhead, as Pat entered. "Fifteen-two, fifteen-four, fifteen-six—and a pair's eight. Thet's two dollars you owe me—runt!"

But Sam's searching eyes were on Pat, dropped to the blood-soaked bandages around his hand. "So yuh didn't elope!' 'he commented dryly. "What she do—bite yuh?"

"Cut the deck a shade deeper," grunted the sheriff.

"How come you rode out with June Larsen at sunup. Ef Sally gits wise tuh yore shenanigans, you old wart hog, they'll be a hair-pullin' bee."

"Wal, I nosed out the payroll, while you two range tramps was idling away your youth with the filthy pasteboards," returned Pat complacently.

"What!" yelled Sam. "Don't tell me you done lifted the mortgage with thet reward money."

"Nope," returned the sheriff glumly. "The coin was lifted not the mortgage, right under my nose." Dropping into the swivel chair, he told of his misadventures.

"Now ef we'd been along," began Sam.

"You'd ha' been snorin' like a hawg on the fancy bearskin rug they got at the Circle L," drawled Pat. "Now lissen! We're gonna hit for the spread pronto. Come sun-up, we'll hit the trail. Them highbinders may drift along easy, figgering I'm trussed up." He rose, "Le's feed our tapeworms, then we'll split the breeze."

Beneath a great yellow moon that silvered the ridges, they rode into the brooding silence of the Circle L. The shriek of a mountain lion quavered from the shrouded hills. Bats circled on silent pinions around the dilapidated barn. Watered and fed, the ponies were loosed in a corral. Then the three bedded down in the house.

Dawn found them beating through the hills, Ezra in the lead. "The varmits shore didn't rattle their hocks," he announced over his shoulder. "They ain't moved faster'n a walk so far."

"Which don't depress my spirits none," rejoined Pat. "Don't ferget you ain't hobbled."

"He's doin' his best," said Sam silkily. "Old age done overtook him, way back."

The big redhead snorted, and pricked his pony with the spurs.

In a glade they found the ashes of a camp fire. Ezra scraped them aside with his boot and placed a huge palm on the ground. "Warm!" he rumbled.

Noon found them far to the West,

deep in the jumble of hill and canyon that bordered the Barrens. In single file they threaded through the boulders of a dry wash that curved between steep cutbanks. The air was still and stifling, tainted with the nauseating odor of skunkweed crushed beneath the ponies' hoofs.

Sam dropped sleepily over the horn. "I gamble—" he yawned. What he intended to gamble was undisclosed. With a shrill whine, a bullet ricocheted off a rock beside his stirrup. His frightened pony pawed the air, screamed as another slug took it in the neck, crashed down in a flurry of dust. Sam flung himself clear. As the roar of the explosions reverberated through the canyon, Pat and Ezra hit the grit and dove for cover.

Crouching behind boulders, the three waited. "Looks like we caught up with trouble," said Pat with a slow grin. "Le's go grab them Winchesters!" He jerked erect — and dropped as suddenly. Two rifles spoke. The echoes in their ears, the three plunged towards the ponies, wrestled rifles out of saddle boots and threw themselves behind cover again—but not before a slug nicked off the heel of Sam's left boot.

"Kin you beat it!" he growled, saddened eyes on the still form of his pony. "First my hawss, then my doggoned boot heel."

Bellied into the hot sand in a next of rock, Pat peered cautiously up canyon, now as silent as a grave. But he could guess what lay beyond; one bandit was hightailing with the loot, while his two companiosn covered the trail.

Near by, Ezra was sprawled in the lee of a boulder, while Sam crouched in a niche of the bank, screened by low-spreading manzanita.

PAT INCHED his hat into view around the side of a weathered boulder, meanwhile squinting around the further side. A rifle spat and the speeding slug punched a neat round hole in the sweat-stained Stetson. The sheriff's searching eyes marked a haze of blue smoke at the foot of a tall pinon, whose knotted roots were exposed by the eroding bank.

Rifle cuddled to shoulder, he waited, gaze focussed on the squat brush that grew thick around the pinon. A branch swayed slightly. Pat squeezed the trigger, levered out the spent shell. Fired and levered again, three times. Something threshed around in the brush like a freshly landed fish. Ezra's gun poured lead into the hot sand as Sam joined in the fusillade.

Squirming convulsively, a grey-shirted figure rolled out of the brush, toppled over the edge of the crumbling bank and flopped heavily down into the wash. Beyond the crumpled form the remaining rifleman flung lead frenziedly down canyon, his bullets ricocheting and moaning around the rocks. Abruptly, the outburst of fire ceased.

Pat lay prone. The sun scorched the nape of his neck and a horned toad investigated his left ear. In his mind's eye he saw the third bandit drawing further and further away with the payroll gold.

"Cover me!" he yelled suddenly. "I'm going ahead."

He marked a bulge in the bank a dozen paces distant, sprang to his feet and flung for its shelter, tensed for the numbing impact of a bullet, but no shot came. Again, crouching, he darted forward. The gunman hidden in the chaos of rocks ahead still held his fire.

Crunching footsteps pulled his head round. Sam and Ezra were dodging from boulder to boulder in his wake. Panting, they dropped beside him.

"Mebbe we plugged 'em both, gasped Sam.

"Nope," said Pat. "I gamble the other jasper skee-daddled. Thet's why he threw plenty lead, tuh hold us. You go get the hawses, Ezra. Sam and me u'll work ahead."

Disdaining cover, the pair plodded through the skunkweed, following the uneven course of the wash. At the body of the dead man they stopped. His grey shirt was stiff from drying blood. Flies blackened his slack features.

"We shore made a sieve outta

him," commented Sam, prodding the remains wit hhis boot.

"Le's go!" urged Pat, forging ahead. "Mebbe we kin git his pard."

They rounded a bend—and dove for cover, the sharp bark of a Winchester in their ears. Not two hundred paces distant, a rider stood on the bank, digging into the yielding sand with elbows and toes. He jerked off his Stetson and peered over the top.

The bandit was swinging into leather. Pat levelled his rifle, praying that the barrel was not plugged with sand.

Sighting on the bandit's broad back, he squeezed the trigger. The horseman swayed, recovered, set spurs to his mount. The fleeing bandit sagged over the horn, slowly slid sideways, tumbled headlong and lay motionless, a dark smear on the dun earth. Stirrups swinging, his pony raced madly out of sight.

Ezra wound up the wash behind them, the sheriff's sorrel on the lead. The three gathered around the body of the dead bandit.

"I've shore seen thet map afore," muttered Sam, squinting at the whiskered features.

"Cheyenne Charlie," said the sheriff sharply. "Rode f'r Nels Larsen, served a stretch for hawss thieving."

"Wal, there ain't but one left," rumbled Ezra, "and he's leading a loaded pack pony."

"The upper of his right boot is torn, laced with rawhide," added Pat.

"And he wears store teeth," flung in Sam offhand.

"Prove it, yuh little runt!" roared Ezra, glaring at the grinning Sam.

"Prove I'm wrong," shot back Sam. 'I got as much license tuh run off at the mouth as you hairpins."

"Wal, let's ketch the hombre," suggested the sheriff, stepping into his stirrup. "Then you windies kin talk him tuh death."

Sam backtrailed towards the pony beneath the oak.

AGAIN THE three strung out and the tedious manhunt was resumed. Gradually, the trail veered round in a circle until, as the sun dropped westward, they were headed back for the Circle L. With puzzled eyes, the sheriff pulled up abreast of Ezra. "You shore of the sign?" he queried. "This jest don't make hawss-sense."

The redhead pointed a thick forefinger at the trail. "Plain as wagon load of hay," he rumbled. "A ridden pony and a led hawss, driftin' along easy."

"'Pears like the hombre is mighty sure his pards stopped us, too sure for my peace of mind," returned Pat. "I gamble we step right inter a hornet's nest afore long. This gent is no jackass, though he shore acts the part."

But no untoward incident disturbed the quiet of the lonely trail that led them closer and closer to the Circle L.

Finally, they again reached the aspen grove at which the long day's ride had started. Pat glimpsed movement by the corral beside the house. At his curt word of warning, Sam and Ezra peeled out of leather. Alert for action, the three injuned forward through the slim trees. Screened by a fringe of brush, they eyed the ranch house.

Saddled and bridled, a riderless pony stood by the corral gate. Beside it, a laden pack pony dozed, tail flicking lazily.

"I'll go git him!" grated Pat. "You fellers grease yore trigger fingers. This is too danged easy!"

Rifle beneath his arm, he broke from cover, advanced across the open ground towards the silent ranch houses. His eyes swivelled round, searching for a sign of the surviving bandit. Nothing stirred. The saddled pony turned its head, whinnied.

Pat reached the house, flung open the door and jumped to one side. Six-gun in his fist, he stepped inside, braced to meet the challenge of a roaring gun. Still no sign of his quarry. Rapidly, he moved from room to room, yanked the kitchen table beneath the opening to the attic and thrust his head up into its dimness. But the fugitive had disappeared.

He strode back to the door and

motioned to his pards. Leading the ponies, they moved towards the house.

"This beats creation!" The sheriff's voice was sharp with apprehension. "The jigger foxes through the hills most all day, and then beats it, leaving us the loot and his saddle hawss. It jest don't make sense."

"Crazy from the heat, mebbe," suggested Sam.

"Crazy like a coyote," growled Pat. He crossed towards the pack pony. Its kyacks were piled with bulky sacks, roped securely into place.

Pat pulled out his Barlow knife and ripped the topmost sack. Grey rock spilled out.

"Hogswiggled, by Gawd!" yelped Sam.

The sheriff fingered the remaining sacks, felt the rock with which they were filled. Then the solution dawned on him. He chuckled in dire appreciation of his quarry's shrewd trick.

"Git it?" He swung round towards his wide-eyed pards.

Ezra slowly spat in deep disgust. "Shore. The runaway pony caught up with the hombre leading the pack pony. He figgered we'd plugged the gents covering the trail. He switched the gold tuh the runaway, muffled its hooves with gunnysacks, mebbe. Then he piles rock on the pack pony and slips off the trail with the loot. The two ponies mosey back tuh the home corral and we foller like three dogblasted jugheads."

"Speak f'r yoreself," cut in Sam morosely. "Some one-eyed galoots cain't track a wagon through a boghole."

"Let it lay!" grunted Pat. "Thet hombre was jest a mite too smart for us. But he'll overplay his hand—they all do."

CHAPTER X

THREE SILENT men rode back over the dusty trail to Dutch Springs. The sheriff mulled over the events of the day; Ezra sulked over the dandy the alert bandit had run over him; Sam mused on the reward money that had seemed so close, but was now so far away. Pat was not the only one with a "plaster" on his spread!

Nels Larsen figured in the sheriff's mind. Pat knew Nels from before. The ex-broncobuster was tough and tricky, with no more respect for the law than the law could enforce with a six-gun. Rumor had it that he had drifted down to Arizona after the fracas with his wife, but news of easy pickings in Powder Valley may have lured him back. Cheyenne Charlie was one of his old cronies. The loot was cached at his ranch and his ponies were used to tote it away. Pat remembered the stink of fresh dung in the horse barn. That barn had been used plenty of late. Every sign shouted "Nels." Looked like he had linked up with Lerou. But, dang it, the sheriff's lips twisted with annoyance, there was not one concrete piece of evidence that would justify a warrant for the arrest of the boss of the Circle L. The sole clue the train wreck had yielded was the flour sack mask that Ezra had picked up on the prairie, a sack to which traces of a fragrant scent still clung.

Sam and Ezra pulled off at The Gold Eagle to wash the trail dust out of their throats. There were weightier matters on Pat's mind. He headed for the livery. Two burros stood outside the pie shop, laden with dun sacks. Bent double, a portly Mexican toted them through the low-hung door. June was particular about her flour. From the day of opening, the stout Jose had packed it in from his small mill near Hope-well.

The perspiring Jose grunted an affable "Buenas dias."

Pat nodded and wheeled into the livery. His pony watered and grained, he hit for the leanto office.

Sunk in his swivel chair, feet cocked on the spur-scratched desk, the sheriff built a smoke and considered the case with worried brow. Two holdups, a murder, a train crew smashed up, and no arrests. It didn't set well.

For awhile he pondered, then came

to a decision. He slapped on the sweaty Stetson and emerged from the office, hit for The Bucket of Blood with purposeful steps.

There were more loiterers outside Lerou's joint than patrons inside. The plankwalks were cluttered with construction laborers, moodily clustering around the doorways of the brightly lit saloon, disgustedly spitting out the drifting dust, but not a dollar in their jeans to buy a drink.

The sheriff sighted Maggie Maloney sitting with a bored group of girls at a table in the rear of The Bucket of Blood. The knots of poker players and sprinkling of men along the bar seemed lost in the vast timber and canvas structure.

Maggie rose languidly at his approach. "Look, girls!" she cried. "A cash customer! I saw him first!"

Scarlet lips parted in a smile and with devilment dancing in her dark eyes, she advanced to meet him. "Fine looking figure of a gal," thought Pat in unwilling admiration, "Ef she'd wash the paint off."

"It's nice to see you again, sheriff!" Maggie's voice was softly caressing. "I know you're just itching to buy me a drink."

"Lerou in his office?" queried the sheriff shortly.

"Don't tell me you called to see him!" Her eyes were mocking. "He's over at the barber's."

"Thet's hunky-dory! Le's you and me have a little pow-wow." He grasped her white arm, steered her towards the office.

She waved her free arm gaily towards the short-skirted, rouged group at the table. "I've got me a man, girls!" But Pat felt her muscles tense.

He kicked the door shut behind him and nodded curtly towards the empty chair behind the desk. "Set, ma'am!"

MAGGIE GLANCED at him sharply, then rounded the table and gracefully sank into the chair. "What's this, a new technique?" she inquired lazily, stretching her slim arms.

The sheriff sat on the table edge and stared down at her silently.

"Well!" There was an edge on her voice.

"I was jest trying tuh figger you as a train wrecker."

"Say, how many drinks you had?"

"Lissen, lady," returned Pat stonily. "There was four hombres in thet gang. One had a small feet." He stretched forward and glanced beneath the table at her shapely insteps and high-heeled shoes. "Jest about as small as yourn. He—she—broke away from the gang and headed for town. She dropped her mask, a white flour sack, with slits. It was a clear giveaway, because the scent she used stuck to it. Thet scent was Odor du Amour, I guess you called it. Not another gal uses it in town. Ain't thet a fact?"

Maggie Maloney was sober enough now. Questioning, her dark eyes met his.

"Is this a shakedown, or are you crazy?" she demanded.

"Sniff this!" Pat yanked a crumbled flour sack out of a pocket and dropped it on the table.

Maggie picked it up and held it beneath her nose.

"Wal?"

"It's my scent," she admitted coolly.

"How did it get on thet sack?"

Maggie shrugged her white shoulders indifferently. "How would I know?"

"See heah, Maggie," grated the sheriff. "You can't bluff outta this. Come clean and I'll give you two hours tuh leave town. Dumb up and you go tuh the hoosegow, charged with holdup and conspiracy to murder. Thet mean a life stretch!"

The dance-hall girl rose, eyes blazing. "She's game," thought Pat.

"You can't railroad me, you dumb ox," she raged. "I was never out of the saloon when the pay train was wrecked. Get out of here before I have Lerou throw you out!"

"And you kin prove yore alibi by Lerou, Silky and a bunch of floosies whose combined oath ain't worth a dead cigar butt," derided Pat. "You come along with me!"

He slipped off the table edge, took a quick pace towards the defiant Maggie. "Lerou! Silky!" Her shrill shriek filled the room. "Come—quick!"

Small fists clenched, she hammered the sheriff's face and chest as he crowded her against the wall. Outside, he heard the shuffle of feet on the sanded floor. He grabbed the girl, threw his left arm around her, pinned her arms down.

The door flew open, Lerou burst in, Silky Selby at his heels. Behind them pattered a flock of chattering dance-hall girls.

With his free hand, Pat jerked the gun out of his holster and cocked it with one swift motion. Lerou's right hand dove swiftly beneath his black coat. Silky slid to the side of the room. The girls packed the doorway.

"Pull thet hideaway," snapped the sheriff, "and I'll drop yuh!" His levelled gun swivelled. "Silky, git back tuh the door!"

Lerou froze, hand beneath his armpit. Expressionless as usual, Silky Selby came to a halt.

"What's the trouble, Maggie?" he whispered.

"This big goof claims I helped hold up the train," she shrilled.

"You picked up the wrong hand, sheriff," said Silky softly.

"Thet's f'r me to say," returned Pat crisply.

A BARKEEP broke through the press of girls, grasping a sawed-off shotgun. At sight of Maggie, held tight against Pat, and the sheriff's circling gun, he came to a quick stop, staring around in popeyed bewilderment.

Silky spoke again, his whispering voice plain in the brittle silence. "Better throw in your hand, sheriff, you can't get out of here—with Maggie."

"She's goin', right now," Pat assured him grimly. He had noted a door to his left, that gave exit to the rear of the saloon. Arm firmly locked around Maggie's twisting form, he shuffled slowly sideways towards it, dragging her with me.

Lerou had not spoken, but the sheriff saw a quick glint in his eyes that foreshadowed action. Selby had been sliding backwards. He whispered to the white aproned barkeep. Pat, gun held on Lerou, saw the short barrel of the shotgun edge up. "Hell," he thought, swiftly calculating his chances, "thet dumb gink will blast the pair of us into shreds. And if I down him, Lerou will get me."

"Drop that gun, Johnny," squealed Maggie frantically. "Cut it out! You'll make mincemeat out of me, too. Stop him, Lerou!"

Lerou swung round, wrenched the gun out of the barkeep's hands.

Pat reached the door now. It was latched. With one hand he held the gun, with the other, Maggie.

She grasped his predicament. "Loose me!" she urged in a husky undertone. "There'll be blue murder if we don't get out of here."

His grasp relaxed. He felt her arm go back and fingers fumble for the doorknob. The door swung open, outwards, and a cool breeze welled in. His opponents stood irresolute, held back only by the threat of his pointing gun. He could see Lerou's long fingers twitching.

Quickly, he stepped outside and kicked the door shut.

Maggie released her breath in a deep sigh of relief. "Gee!" Her husky voice shook. "Johnny's dumb enough to let fly with both barrels of that shotgun." The sheriff became aware that his shirt was sticking to his back. He suddenly felt foolish, standing in the dark, tightly embracing Maggie. His arm slackened about the girl's waist, he shifted his grip to her arm. Impatiently, she wrenched free. "You don't have to maul me!" She added vindictively, "I wouldn't be wearing your pants for a million dollars when the boys get wise to this.'

Pat wanted no more trouble with the volatile Maggie. To avoid contact with the construction hands who idled thick upon the plankwalls, he conducted her down the rear of the stores and tents that fronted Main Street. In tight-lipped silence, Maggie stumbled through a litter of

empty cans and discarded bottles, in her high-heeled shoes.

Sam and Ezra were tranquilly smoking in the office. At sight of the bare-armed girl, in low-cut evening dress and dark hair pyramided high, their jaws dropped.

"Gimme the keys of the cooler," requested Pat, behind the scornful Maggie.

"You ain't jailing—her!" gasped Sam.

"Jest watch me!" said Pat coldly. Due to the dearth of ready money in Dutch Springs, the jail lacked its customary quota of drunks. Two Mexicans, picked up in a knifing affray, and an Irishman, who had crowned a barkeep with a bottle, were the sole inmates. In wondering silence they watched the sheriff unlock the door of an empty cell and usher the girl inside.

Maggie had not spoken a word since she left the vicinity of The Bucket of Blood.

"I'll tote some blankets over later," said the sheriff gruffly, as he clicked the door behind her. He hated to jail a woman, but two men had been killed in the Coyote Cut wreck. The lingering odor of Maggie's scent on the mask was plain proof that she was implicated. Blondy had confessed her part in the affray, and so would Maggie, he assured himself, after a night in a cell.

Pat read the question in his pards' eyes when he irritably jerked open the desk drawer and dropped the keys inside. "Wal, we got one hold-up artist," he commented.

"Not thet gal!" Sam's voice reflected his disbelief.

"Ever see a prettier sight than a wildcat, 'til it shows its teeth?" boomed Ezra.

"You hit it, Ezra." Pat dropped the creased flour sack on the desk. "Thet's what jugged Maggie." He told of the dance-hall girl's exclusive scent, sent especially from New York for her use. But still Sam, belligerent as a terrier, was obdurate.

"Wimmen jest don't wreck trains, it ain't their nature," he objected.

"Betcher the two cartwheels yuh owes me she spills her guts come sun-up," challenged Ezra.

"It's a bet!" snapped Sam.

BILL NORTH brought the first hint of impending trouble. The tall young railroader, now paymaster down the Yard, hustled into the sheriff's office an hour later. "You'd better fort up," he warned tightly. "There's trouble brewing at The Bucket of Blood. Lerou's thrown the joint wide open. Free whisky for all. The place is packed to the doors. Right now they're passing out bottles to the overflow on the plankwalk. And they're damning you, sheriff, as the biggest skunk ever created. Maggie's the belle of The Bucket of Blood. When those construction hands get liquored up, they're liable to tear the town apart."

Before he finished his recital, Jake Pearce's stocky form filled the doorway. "You sure make a martyr of Maggie," he told Pat. The idea of Lerou's passion flower enduring martyrdom evidently tickled him, for his ruddy features crinkled in a gust of silent laughter. "Hustle the gal out of town before trouble breaks."

The sheriff shook his head. "We'll never get her out of town—now. Best I kin do is gather a bunch of deputies and ride herd on the hoosegow." He dispatched Sam and Ezra to round up every dependable citizen who could be deputized, then slipped out into the night himself.

At first sight it seemed that Main Street was deserted. The plankwalks had emptied. As if realizing the futility of his vocal efforts, a barker leaned against the front of a saloon smoking a cigar. A few wayfarers brushed past Pat, evidently headed somewhere in a hurry.

The mystery was solved when the sheriff neared The Bucket of Blood. A deep, rumbling roar throbbed from within its plank walls. North had not exaggerated. When Pat surveyed the saloon from the shadows of the opposite plankwalk, he saw that it was veritably packed to the door. A torrent of sound poured from the seeth-

ing mob of construction laborers filling up on Lerou's free whisky—drunken shouts, hoarse threats, ribald song. Beneath the flaming lamps at the entrance, men were clustered like swarming bees striving to enter a crowded hive. Two barkeeps elbowed through the press, a case of whisky slung between them. Before they reached the plankwalk, it was wrested from them and a hundred thirsty men fought for the bottles.

The drought in Dutch Springs had ended, but, thought Pat bitterly, Lerou was not emptying his cellar out of pity for dollar-starved railroaders. There was a sinister motive behind his lavish generosity. The motive was only too plain.

A dozen or more deputies, all old-timers, packed the little leanto when the sheriff re-entered his office. Each was armed with shotgun or Winchester. Briefly, Pat warned them of expected trouble, posted a cordon round the jail, held the remainder in reserve.

For awhile, all was quiet. The office filled with smoke as men puffed pipes and cigarettes, hunkering around the walls.

Then, pandemonium broke loose down Main Street. A trouble-hungry mob poured from The Bucket of Blood, with but one aim in their muddled minds—to free Maggie Maloney.

Pat hustled his reserve force outside and doubled the circle of armed men around the adobe jail. Standing in the darkness, he listened to the hullabaloo that heralded the approach of the mob. Shouting, singing, cursing, they surged down Main Street, flooding the plankwalks, scuffing wild-eyed through the thick dust of the street. A premonition of defeat chilled the sheriff. Before this mob his little band of deputies would be swept away like ships on a raging current. Resistance was futile. Why attempt to fight a hopeless battle? Free Maggie! The moment of weakness passed. He had sworn to enforce the law. Maggie Maloney had helped hold up the pay train. Her place was behind the bars. Mob, or no mob, he'd hold her for trail. A ragged, yelling column, the throng streamed around both sides of the Courthouse and converged upon the little jail in its rear. In the gloom, Pat watched the shadowy mass of men, closing in around the line of guards. The sheriff drew his six-gun, pointed it skyward fired. Sudden silence draped the mob—an ominous silence, like the tense calm that precedes a violent storm.

Pat's shouted warning broke the quiet: "Don't let Lerou fool yuh, fellers. Maggie helped grab your coin. She's in the hoosegow and she'll stay—" A concerted roar beat on his eardrums and drowned his voice. A guard's gun crashed. In thundering reply a dozen gun flashes winked from the mob, the roar of the explosions mingled with the tinkle of glass as the windows of the office splintered. Around the sheriff, the night became alive with dim, hurtling forms. Before he could thumb back the hammer of his gun a flailing fist took him on the side of his head and he sprawled headlong.

CHAPTER XI

HEAD RINGING from the impact of the swinging fist, the sheriff scrambled to his feet—to be carried along in the mad push of yelling, delirious construction hands, surging towards the jail, as irresistible in their blind rush as a stampeded herd. For the next few minutes, his impresions were blurred. In the darkness, it was impossible to distinguish friend from foe. The sheriff was jostled by cursing, panting men. Guns blared, the flashes illuminatying a sea of wildly excited faces.

Like a wave, the onrush broke against the sturdy adobe walls of the jail, flowed around it, swamped all opposition. The thin cordon of deputies was swept aside and submerged in the tide of brawny humanity.

Men battered the ironbound door of the jail with their fists, threw their bodies against it, but the stout timbers defied them. Pat worked his

way clear of the press, headed for the office. Backed against its front, ignored by the clamoring mob that milled around the jail, were grouped the remnants of his small force. He recognized Ezra's hulking form, Bill North's straight figure, Jake Pearce, three or four deputies. The remainder had disappeared in the human vortex.

Behind the office towered the huge boxlike outline of the Courthouse. Its windows stared down at the scene of riot and confusions.

From behind the shadowy press of bodies that hid the jail door came a heavy, rhythmic pounding—someone had brought a sledge hammer and was smashing the pine planking.

Hopelessly, the sheriff's eyes ran over the survivors of his defense force. If the little group attempted to intervene, the mob would brush them aside like flies. Yet, if the swarm of rioters was not checkmated, the jail door would cave in before many minutes passed. Sight of the Courthouse windows brought inspiration. He gestured, led the way into the shadow of the Courthouse at a run, the remnant of his force thudding behind him.

Pat swung open a rear doorway, stood aside to allow the panting men behind him to crowd in, then slammed the door shut and shot a heavy bolt home. They stood in a corridor that ran the length of the Courthouse. Feeling his way in the pitch darkness, the sheriff fumbled along the wall, located a bracketted oil lamp and lifted it down. He set a match to the wick.

Long shadows wavered up the silent corridor. For the first time, the sheriff saw that his aides were not unscathed. North's left eye was closing and blood trickled from the corner of his mouth. Ezra's jaw was cut and swollen. Jake Pearce's features were smeared with blood.

"Lissen!" Pat's voice was hard. "The winders upstairs cover the hoosegow. We kin blast the varmints from up there and they cain't get back at us—unless they smoke us out. Let's get tuh work!"

Headed by the sheriff, toting the lamp, the file of men clattered up the bare wooden stairway. On the second floor were the judge's chambers and offices of county officials.

Pat entered a high-ceilinged room, lined with yellow-backed files of court records. Two lofty windows looked down on the flat roof of the jail. The sheriff blew out the lamp, crossed to the nearer window and hinged it wide open.

Below, he could see the outlines of the mob swarming around the jail entrance. The sledge still swung, its evenly blows reverberating like the pounding of a great drum.

"Gimme a scattergun!" rasped Pat. North pushed a short-barreled shotgun into his hands. At that distance, Pat knew that the charge of buckshot would not kill, but, spreading over a wide area, could not fail to inflict painful, but superficial wounds upon a large number of the rioters. If he could flush the mob away from the jail door, the prisoners might yet be held.

Covering the massed men, bulging black around the jail, he loosed both barrels. Hoarse bellows of pain mingled with shouts of rage as the mob scattered. A bullet flew through the open window in reply. Pat ejected the empties and slid two more shells into the breach. Again he loosed a blast of leaden pellets.The wavering mob below streamed for shelter. The jail front was wiped clean of men, revealing the partially shattered door.

"Reckon thet'll hold the coyotes," growled Ezra, from the dark behind the peering sheriff.

"Not if they can lay their hands on a few picks," came North's voice. "They'll knock a hole in that adobe wall, back of the jail, as fast as you can roll a cigarette."

WES LANGARD, the jailor, leaned on the window ledge beside Pat. From force of habit, he built a smoke. His match flared. Too late, the sheriff knocked the tell-tale light out of his hand. A gun flash

blossomed white in the gloom below. Pat heard the flat slap of lead on flesh. Langard grunted, sagged forward. The sheriff grabbed his legs as his body slid out of the window, yanked him back into the room. He lay limp and unconscious on the floor. Pat followed and relit the lamp. The bullet had gouged a bloody furrow along the jailer's scalp. Leaving his companions to adjust a makeshift bandage, the sheriff returned to his observation post.

Quiet now enveloped the battleground around the jail. Not a rioter was in sight. As his eyes became accustomed to the dim light, Pat picked out still forms sprawled on the ground. Then, through the night, came the steady tap, tap, tap of picks pecking insistently on sun-hardened adobe. The rioters were hacking a hole in the rear wall of the jail and, thought the sheriff bitterly, there was nothing he could do to stop them.

For awhile he listened to the steady play of the picks, then, with a stab of apprehension, his thoughts flew to Sam. He hadn't seen his perky little pard since the mob first cascaded around the Courthouse. Was his body among those lying on the ground below?

The sheriff left the window, as a vantage point it was useless now. A glum group was gathered in the corridor, eyeing North as he finished the job of patching up the unconscious Languard.

"Lamp Sam around?"

Ezra shook his unruly thatch moodily at the sheriff's sharp question. "Nope, haven't set eyes on the little rooster in a coon's age. I gamble he gives St. Peter a good argyment at the Pearly Gates."

Footsteps echoed hollowly in the corridor below, briskly ascended the stairway. Every head swivelled. Sam's dark hair came into view, then his squat body.

"Whar in hell you been hidin' out?" bellowed Ezra, in manifest relief.

"Not in the Courthouse, like you jaspers," snapped Sam. "I been in action. Who loosed off thet dog-goned shotgun? I'll be eatin' standing up f'r the next month."

"You got yore just deserts," rumbled Ezra, "mingling with thet murderin' pack. By rights, Pat should commit yuh, right now."

"Whar?" inquired Sam caustically. "They've knocked a hole in the dawgoned cooler yuh could drive a team through. I been keeping cases on the hairpins. You fellers kin come outta hidin' now, they done vamossed."

The little band of survivors tramped down the stairway and filed out through the rear door. Silence wreathed the jail. Every rioter had faded into the night, except the few whose forms lay quiet beneath the stars.

Sam led the way to the rear of the jail. Here, out of sight and range of the lawmen at the Courthouse windows, the mob had hacked a gaping hole in the adobe wall. Pat stepped through, struck a match. Cell doors hung open with smashed locks. Maggie and her fellow prisoners had been spirited away.

Pat set his men to gathering up the dead. Two deputies and five laborers were laid aside by side outside the office. Other deputies were unaccounted for, but the sheriff figured they had either mingled with the mob and slipped away to their homes, or had headed for Doc Trimble's bungalow to be patched up. He dispatched two men to pack Wes Langard down to the Doc's, then entered his office. Slumped in his swivel chair, he direly contemplated the splintered fragments projecting from the window frames and the litter of broken glass on the floor. Lerou had made the law in Dutch Springs a dead letter. He had freed Maggie Maloney....and the price had been seven lives. Seven men sacrificed that a dance-hall girl with a yen for train robery might go free! The sheriff's grey eyes hardened with cold anger. There'd be a payoff, or he'd know the reason why.

PAT DOZED fitfully until daybreak. Heavy-eyed, he strode through the greying dawn, Sam and Ezra tagging behind. When he

stepped through the ever-open doorway of The Bucket of Blood, the scene that met his eyes brought him to a stop. Lerou's joint was a wreck. The floor was strewn with empty bottles, smashed glasses, shattered tables and chairs. Drunks were stretched amid the debris. Two sleepy swampers were making a half-hearted attempt to clean up the mess.

Behind the long bar, the ornate mirrors were cracked in a dozen places, shelved bottles had tumbled down, broken glass heaped on the shelves.

"Reckon the herd got outta hand afore Lerou stampeded them f'r the hoosegow," grunted Ezra.

"I guess they staged a victory dance, they shore waltzed all over the joint," put in Sam, with satisfaction.

"Lerou around?" bawled Pat. A swamper inclined his head drowsily towards the office. Pat crunched over broken glass towards it, when the door opened and the saloon man appeared. Lerou's dark suit, usually immaculate, was creased and dust dabbed; his chin stubbled and his string tie askew. He waited as the sheriff advanced to meet him.

A pace apart, Pat halted. Face to face, both men eyed each other with unveiled hostility.

"So yuh loosed Maggie!" said the sheriff softly.

Lerou switched on his mechanical smile. "Not me, sheriff—the men from the Yard."

"You set 'em to it!"

The other shrugged. "I deny the accusation."

"They lickered up on yore redeye—for free."

Lerou's thin lips twisted with malicious humor. "You may not believe it, but I am a generous man. When they're in velvet, they patronize my saloon. When they're flat broke, they drink on the house."

"Seven men died last night." The sheriff's voice was somber. "And you're the murderer!"

A quick surge of anger wiped the set smile from the saloon keeper's face. "If you have a warrant, arrest me!" he rasped. "If not, get out of this saloon. I deny all knowledge of the affair. When I feel like serving free drinks—I'll serve them." He swung away but the sheriff's fingers fastened on his shoulder.

"Take your paws off me!" he snarled.

Pat spun him round, thrust his left hand inside Lerou's coat and yanked out a derringer. He tossed the hideaway over his shoulder and unbuckled his own gunbelt. "Lerou," he gritted, "yore clever, like a coyote. The law cain't touch you, but I can. I'm agoin' tuh pound the daylights out of yore rotten carcass."

The saloon man backed hastily before Pat's low-voiced threat. He tripped over a broken chair, recovered. "Tom, Bill, Harry!" he yelled.

Men issued from the dance hall at the rear. They ran forward, picking their way through the litter. One pulled a gun. Behind the sheriff, Ezra'a deep voice boomed, "Stretch, or I'll let daylight inter yuh!"

The gunman fired hastily. Ezra's forty-five blared. His opponent spun around, dropped. He sat up, staring stupidly at his reddening shoulder. His companions halted in their tracks, arms thrust high.

On the other side of the saloon, Sam was riding herd on the swampers and several bleary-eyed drunks who sluggishly swayed to their feet at sound of gunfire.

PAT reached forward, grabbed Lerou's vest and jerked him close. Fist bunched, his free hand swung against the angle of the other's jaw. Lerou tore free—stepped back. Pat bored in, jabbed him viciously in the midriff. Lerou doubled, gasping, backed into a table. Brought up short, he twisted and dodged as Pat's fists sank into his stomach. With quick indrawn breath, he sagged forward—to stop a swift uppercut that rattled his teeth. Eyes venomous, the saloon man swayed out of reach. Again Pat relentlessly bored in. Lerou's long arms swung wildly. Inside them, the sheriff's hard fists pistoned into his middle—left, right; left, right. Lerou's knees slowly buckled;

desperately, he wrapped his arms around Pat, vainly endeavoring to smother the pounding fists. The sheriff twisted free, flung a straight left at the other's jaw that rocked him back upon his heels. Eyes glazing, Lerou stumbled behind the table, gripped its edge with both hands, gasping for breath like a newly landed fish. Pat followed relentlessly. Lerou's right hand streaked for the back of his neck. A short, bright blade leaped into view. His wrist flicked back, the slim hilt grasped between forefinger and thumb. Pat tipped the table and ducked as the sliver of silver flashed through the air. It zipped into the crown of his Stetson, carried the hat off his head. Then he was atop of Lerou again.

Mercilessly, he ripped into the tall, hook-nosed man, hammering the breath out of his body with short jabs, mashing his features with a flicking left, beating him down with pounding blows.

At last, bloodied and battered, one eye closed tight by swollen, blackened flesh, smashed nose streaming scarlet, mouth cut, Lerou went down. He made a feeble attempt to regain his feet, then flopped back on the sanded floor and lay with heaving chest and closed eyes.

Breathing hard, reddened fists clenched, the sheriff stood above him. "Mebbe you'll think twice," he growled, "afore you run another whizzer over me."

The three pards bellied up to the bar in The Gold Eagle.

"You shore knocked the stuffing outta Lerou," commented Ezra reminiscently, as he downed three fingers. "Kinda ruined the rattlesnake's good looks, ef he ever had any."

"It didn't help none, except ease my feelings," returned Pat soberly. "Reckon he didn't dare leave Maggie in the hoosegow, f'r fear she'd squawk, like Blondy—and the payroll's as far away as ever it was."

"Likewise the reward money," added Sam morosely. "Ef Ezra could track an elephant through three feet of soft snow, we'd be asettin' on top of the world right now."

Ezra downed another drink. "Leastways I didn't stop a charge of buckshot in me backside," he rumbled, "aidin' and abettin' the mob."

Around the three, the bar was lined thick with men discussing the events of the night. A steady drone of talk filled the saloon. A newcomer wedged in beside Pat. The sheriff eased over, glanced down as he did so. His gaze became intent, quick excitement charged his nerves—the upper of the newcomer's right riding boot had been rent and the edges were roughly sewn together with a strip of rawhide.

CHAPTER XII

SIGHT OF THE rudely spliced riding boot, hooked on the bar rail, flooded the sheriff with bitter memories—memories of four masked men ghosting down as he dug sacks of payroll gold out of the mud on the Circle L . . . four men who left him bound, to starve or survive as fate might will. One of those men bellied up to the bar beside him now.

Pat raised his glass, and as his head came up, focused the newcomer's features in the mirror back of the bar. It was a strong face, strong and unscrupulous, deep tanned by the desert sun. The newcomer's blue eyes met the sheriff's with cool bravado—the eyes of a man who feared neither man nor devil. A quirley dangled carelessly from the corner of his firm-set mouth. His long, loose frame was relaxed against the bar. From rakish Stetson to filed-off spurs, Nels Larsen radiated arrogant self-confidence, and the smooth-worn butt of the gun thonged down to his right leg, testified he was ready to back his play, any time.

"Wal, ef it ain't Nels!" The sheriff's tone simulated surprise.

"You guessed it, sheriff, fust time." Larsen's teeth flashed white against his bronzed features.

"Figgered you was down on the Rio Grande."

With his left hand, Larsen trickled a drink from the bottle a barkeep slid towards him.

"I was," he admitted with a chuckle. "But I got itchy dogs, reckon

I'm jest a tumbleweed, rolling along, and the wind done blowed me back tuh Powder Valley."

"Heard you was prospecting," commented Pat casually.

"Prospecting!" echoed Larsen. "Hell, what would I prospect for?"

"Gold!" returned the sheriff pointedly. He noted the veil of caution that quickly dropped over the ether's eyes. The ex-broncobuster slowly downed his drink; set his glass firmly on the bar.

"You wouldn't be—funnin'?" His lips twisted humorously. Pat noted that his right hand dangled above the thonged-down gun. "I hit the target, plumb center," he thought. Aloud, he replied, "Thet's jest talk around town, Nels, never put much stock in it myself. Couldn't picture you nohow, with a pack jinny and shovel, leggin' through the Barrens."

Larsen relaxed, but suspicion still lingered in his eyes. The sheriff's voice drawled on, filling the fleeting moments with small talk as he played for time, time in which to frame a plan of action.

From the first he had suspected Nels, and the torn boot top supplied the evidence he was seeking. Larsen was wary, but apparently was unaware that the sheriff had identified him. If he grabbed the Circle L man now, considered Pat, he would have no clue to the whereabouts of the loot. Nels was no scared dance-hall floosie, to break under questioning, or to quail before threats. He would play his cards close to his vest—and there was nothing to convict him of payroll looting save suspicion and a busted boot top. The sheriff made his decision, kicked Sam's shin and moved back from the bar.

"So long, Nels!" he grunted. "I'll drop in and see yuh some time."

Larsen grinned. "I ain't saying you'll be welcome, you and me's locked horns aplenty in the past. And I ain't saying you"ll find me around. Tumbleweed, thet's me!"

"WHYFOR didn't yuh corral him?" demanded Ezra, as they pushed through the batwings.

"Howcome?" queried Pat.

"Wal, he rods the Circle L and his boot's stitched with rawhide."

"Thet one eye of yourn don't miss nothing," chuckled the sheriff.

"We cain't jug nobody," cut in Sam dolefully. "The cooler's done busted wide open."

"Button up!" advised Pat, "an' lissen. We want the payroll, both payrolls. Larsen's cached thet gold. He won't help us any in the hoosegow. Ef we give the galoot his head, he's liable tuh lead us to it. Then we kin pick him up."

The trio crossed Main Street, drifted down to the bench under the awning of The Jewel Hotel and relaxed in the shade. Almost directly opposite, the batwings of The Gold Eagle squealed on dusty hinges as men pushed in and out.

Hat slanted over his eyes, Pat leaned back and watched the saloon.

Before ten minutes passed Larsen sauntered out, leisurely rolled a smoke, lit up and untied a raw-boned bronc. With the effortless ease of a born horseman, he swung into the saddle and jogged down street. As he passed his estranged wife's little pie shop, June chanced to be outside, sleeves tucked up, washing her windows.

The sheriff heard Nels hail her cheerily. She pivoted abruptly, stared at him, lips tight. Her husband's arm, half raised in careless salutation, dropped quickly. He hastily pricked his pony into a canter and was lost in a haze of dust.

"'Pears like June don't hanker f'r Nels' company," commented Sam.

"I reckon he done tried tuh break break her tuh bit and spur," rumbled Ezra, "and she stuck her bill in the ground and bucked."

"Take a better man than Nels tuh break June," put in Pat. "The Hansens are tougher'n rawhide. Old Oly, her paw, coulda tackled his weight in wildcats with one arm tied." He rose. "Time we was hightailin'. Reckon we'll mosey along Nels' trail."

Half straightened, the sheriff relaxed and dropped back on to the

bench. "Hold it!" he warned quickly. Negligently, he stretched out his long legs as if set for the day.

Sam shot a surprised glance at the sheriff's blank features, took the cue and rolled a cigarette. Ezra had not stirred.

Bulging over his saddle like a bag of jelly, Rolly Poulhi ambled over the ruts. The fat man's bulk wabbled with every step of his big round-bellied gelding. His pudgy features were creased in an amiable smile as he jogged his triple chin towards numerous acquaintances on the plankwalks. He, too, disappeared into Larsen's dust.

"I gotta hunch thet bladder of lard's doggin' Nels," explained Pat, as Rolly's rotund figure faded into distance. "Mebbe we should set awhile tuh give his dust time tuh settle. Seems like the Circle L is getting right popular."

WHEN Dutch Springs sank into its midday siesta, three ponies padded over the yellow carpet of the prairie. Ahead of the riders, the foothills quivered like blue shadows in the heat haze. Coyote Ridge lay like a rampart across their left front.

They hit the parched hills. Nothing stirred save occasional bunches of cows, hiding in brushy draws.

Half-dozing, for he had been on the move for most of the past twenty-four hours, Pat tailed Ezra as they wound deeper into the maze of canyons in which Larsen's spread nestled.

The distant report of a shot punched thinly through the brooding stillness. The sheriff's head jerked up. Wide awake now, he listened intently. Another report drifted from the hills ahead—two more in quick succession. Then there was silence.

"Fracas ahead," grunted Ezra over his shoulder. "Two guns."

"Mebbe Nels cleaned up on Rolly," yawned Sam. "One less tuh cut in."

"Rolly claims he don't pack a gun," returned Pat, kneeing his pony. "Le's shake it up!"

From the aspen grove below the spread, the Circle L appeared to be deserted. Then a pony nickered in the brush. Pat reined off the trail. Hidden in the chaparral, reins knotted around a pinon, was Rolly's gelding.

The sheriff dismounted, moved his hand over the animal's dust covered coat. It was wet. " 'Pears like he rattled his hocks," he commented. "But whar in hell's Rolly?"

"Slid down a badger hole," suggested Sam solemnly.

Pat mounted, urged his mount through the brush towards the house. As the sorrel breasted the slope, the sheriff's searching eyes noted that the front door was wide open and a window pane smashed.

"Grease them trigger fingers," he threw back. "Trouble's brewing."

But no threatening gesture came from the silent ranch house as they piled out of leather at the smooth-worn pine hitch rail. Fingering the the butt of his forty-five, Pat ducked under the rail and moved quickly towards the open door.

He eased inside the house, Sam and Ezra at his heels, glanced snappy around, and stiffened—Rolly's bulk overflowed a straight-backed chair. Dripping red, a bandana was tied roughly around his right forearm. Wheezing with the effort, the cattle buyer was bending forward, head stretched over his protruding paunch, trying to staunch the blood that welled from another wound in the calf of his leg.

"What's the trouble?" inquired Pat crisply.

The fat man glanced up, sweat glistening upon his hanging jowls. "Assault and battery, by person or persons unknown," he chirped cheerfully. "If they'd placed that slug a foot higher I'd had to find that hole by sense of touch, I sure couldn't have lamped it."

"Howcome they threw down on yuh?" demanded Pat, puzzled eyes darting around the room.

Rolly's moonlike face creased in a rueful smile. "You tell me, sheriff. I ride up, peaceful like, to dicker for hosses and some gent throws down on from the brush."

"We heard two guns."

"Mebbe there was two." The ban-

dage adjusted, Rolly rolled down his pants leg.

"Shootin' from the brush?" persisted Pat.

"You said it, mister!" beamed Rolly.

Then howcome they's an empty under the table?" The sheriff bent, picked up a blackened .38 shell, sighted another.

Jingling the empties in the palm of of his hand, he swung on the portly cattle buyer.

Rolly's brow creased in perplexity. "They musta been layin' there," he declared. "You know fat old Rolly, he never packs a gun." Gingerly, he he heaved to his feet, balanced and limped towards the door. "Wal, so-long, gents, this is no place for a peace-loving citizen."

"Hold it!" grated Pat. "You always hide yore cayouse in the brush when you go visiting?"

Rolly's chins wobbled as he shook his head in gentle rebuke. "Not hidden, sheriff," he corrected. "Tied in the shade. Hosses feel the heat, jest like humans.

"I shore crave tuh put the heat on thet hawg," murmured Pat, as they watched the fat man slowly wobble down the slope. "What in thunder did happen around here?"

"Rolly braced Nels f'r his cut of the payroll," supplied Sam promptly, "Nels faned his smoke pole. Rolly jerked out a hideaway, and the lead flew. Rolly goes down and Nels beats it." He picked up the two empty top, sniffed them. "Hell, they have been fired recent, they stink of burnt powder."

Pat dropped the shells in a pocket of his loose-hanging vest. "Wal, yuh heard his story, and I reckon he'll stick to it, unless we kin prove he's lying." The sheriff jerked out his sack of makin's with a gesture of disgust. "Ef this ain't the doggonest case! Every time we hit good sign, some gent fouls it up!"

Reflectively, he watched the cattle buyer break through the brush. In a short while Rolly reappeared, astride the gelding, and wound sedately between the silvery trunks of the shivering aspens.

"Wal?" Sam, ever impatient, edged towards the ponies. "What's the play?"

"Mosey back tuh town," growled Pat. "Guess we been eatin' dust for nothing. We shore won't flush Nels around heah after his fracas with Rolly. Mebbe he figgers he kilt the the big slob, mebbe he jest crippled him apurpose and cleaned out the cache. You cain't prove nothing by me."

NOT A mile distant, the report of a single shot, sharp and distinct, ripped through the sleepy air of heat-blasted hills. Still as statues, the three law-men listened. The echoes of the report muttered away into distance. Nothing further broke the silence save the drone of flies around the ponies, and the faint splashing of the spring.

Pat met Sam's inquiring eyes. "What d'ye make of thet?" he asked.

"Mebbe Rolly shot a squirrel."

"And he jest swore he didn't tote a gun. Rolly's too slick to tip his hand thataway. Le's ride!"

The sheriff was already loosing the reins of his pony. He flung into leather, wheeled and pricked the sorrel into a gallop. Sam and Ezra tailed him.

Clear of the aspens, the three hurtled down trail. It dipped through the sparse timber of a draw, meandered over the floor of a tiny valley, then straightened as it shot through a boulder-littered canyon. It was in this canyon that Pat sighted the riderless gelding, cropping the sparse herbage. He pulled down his pony, arm upraised to check the two riders drumming behind.

The unwieldy body of the cattle buyer lay on the trail, flat on his back, his paunch curving up like a balloon.

Pat swung out of the saddle, dropped on his knees beside the bulky form. Rolly's fat lips gaped like a codfish and there was no life in his eyes.

With difficulty, Pat rolled over the slack form. A red stain on the grey shirt, below the cattle buyer's left

shoulder, answered the question in the sheriff's mind.

"Bushwhacked!" Sam pressed close, staring.

"Nels shore had the last word in thet argyment—the sidewinder!" rumbled Ezra.

Pat straightened, eyed the steep slopes on either side, sprinkled with jack pine, patched with juniper, "The killer laid f'r Rolly up yonder. Cast around f'r sign, Ezra—this is murder!"

The big man toiled up the slope. Pat hunkered against a tree trunk and mechanically rolled a smoke as he eyed the corpse. Nels, if Nels had plugged Rolly, must have had a mighty urgent reason to close his mouth. He must have known there were three lawmen within sound of the shot. Or mebbe, mused Pat, he didn't. With a fortune in looted gold at stake, Nels was too shrewd to take chances.

Ezra was ferreting around, high on the slope. Presently, he came sliding down, crashing through the thin brush. He tossed an empty shell towards the sheriff. "Winchester," he rumbled.

"Whose?" queried Pat.

"Nels Larsen's," grunted the redhead. "Leastways, he forked Nels' hawse. The critter's soft shoed and paddles a mite. He hightailed, over the ridge."

"Wal, I guess we gotta pack this hairpin inter town." Pat rose, stamped out his butt.

Sam's inquisitive fingers were exploring the dead man's pockets. "Holy rattlesnake's puppies," he ejaculated. "Lookat this!" He held up a pair of light steel handcuffs.

A quick step and the sheriff was beside him. Pat threw open the dusty unbuttoned vest. Sewn in the inside lining was a metal badge. "Wal, I'll be jiggered," he rapped out. "Kin yuh beat thet? He's a Pinkerton man!"

CHAPTER XIII

WHILE THE astounded sheriff examined the metal badge sewn into the pseudo cattle buyer's vest, Sam and Ezra digested its import with incredulous eyes.

"Not—fat Rolly!" protested Sam, finally finding his voice.

"Ain't no two ways about it!" pronounced Pat. "Lookat the badge, and the cuffs!"

"But he was closer tuh Lerou and Silky than their shirts," pointed out Sam, still unconvinced.

"Thet was his play." Light was breaking in the sheriff's mind. Rolly was an undercover man, planted ahead. Looked like he was mighty close to locating the loot. Nels or Lerou must have got wise, tolled the fat man up to the Circle L and fed him a dose of lead. Pat's eyes softened as he gazed at the limp fleshy form. Rolly had guts aplenty. He'd wormed his way into the renegade gang, well knowing that one slip would mean his finish. And finally he'd slipped.

Ezra's deep voice broke in upon the sheriff's thoughts. He nodded at the dead detective. "Played a lone hand—and lorst the trick! Might jest as well try tuh corral a jackrabbit in these heah hills as round up the coyote who downed him."

A hundred eyes followed the little cavalcade that rode into town, with Rolly's remains flopped across his saddle. The town was still agog with the jail breaking affray of the previous night. Pat sensed that his prestige had dropped plenty. "Well," he thought grimly, "the last card ain't played yet."

They toted the body to the shed behind the mercantile store that served as mortuary. Already it was jam-packed with victims of the overnight riot.

Jake Pearce shouldered along the plankwalk as they emerged, hastened down the alleyway that led to the morgue.

"You bring Rolly in?" His voice was husky with concern.

Pat nodded.

"Who got him?"

"Bushwhacked—by Nels Larsen."

The detective swore, deep in his throat. "Rolly was hot, too," he muttered, "but the doggone mule wouldn't run in harness. He was hell

bent to go it alone." He raised his voice, "What say you spill the story?"

Pat told of trailing Larsen and Rolly to the Circle L; finding Rolly wounded; the bushwhack bullet. "And afore we go ahead," he concluded curtly, "you spread yore hand, Jake. You got any more undercover men around heah—Silky . . . f'r instance?"

The Pinkerton man shook his head. "Nope, no one that you'd know. Rolly was always a lone wolf. He was stalking the reward money. Reckon those snake-blooded hairpins outguessed him. Any chance of pulling in Larsen?"

"Not as long as he rides clear of town. Nels was born in the hills, we'll never corral the bustard in his own country. I'll gamble the loot's cached up there, too."

Jake expectorated in disgust. "Seems like we're buttin' into a rock wall. First Blondy's knocked off, then Maggie breaks jail, now Larsen plugs my best man—and we ain't uncovered a dollar from those two payrolls." He shrugged. "Wal, guess we'll get on with the job. So-long!" He moved down the alleyway and mingled with the throng on the plankwalk.

BILL NORTH ducked through the fly curtain that draped the low-framed door of June Larsen's tiny pie shop. Cool and serene as always, the girl regarded her visitor with appraising eyes. Since the episode of Maggie's visit to the jail North had steered clear of the pie shop.

"Hello June!" he grinned. "Long time no see!"

"I'm open every day." Her voice was unconcerned.

"Let bygones be bygones," he begged. "I've been awfully busy since they gave me the paymaster's job. The payroll came through today—which means I'll sweat over time sheets all night."

"Well guarded, I hope!" There was a maternal note in June's clear voice.

"I'll say! The Yard's over-run with armed men. They took no chances this time, had a pilot engine run ahead of the pay train, and deputies packed like sardines in the caboose." The tone of the young paymaster's voice changed. "Let's forget the beastly railroad. This is good-bye June!"

Her eyes widened. "Good-bye!"

"Yes, I've quit the Chicago & Rio Grande. Always hated the job. Now I'm going to make money, big money!"

The girl smiled faintly. "I like to make money, too. May I share the secret?"

North glanced quickly around, his voice lowered. "Steel is almost through the Valley. In three months Dutch Springs will be a ghost town. They'll jump the construction camp to Indian Flat, thirty miles north. Got the tip from a pal at headquarters." His voice vibrated with eagerness. "Look what happened here. It'll be the same story over again. Land will sky-rocket, and I'm in on the ground floor. Maybe I'll make a million!" He paused breathless.

"Gambler's gold!" smiled June.

"What do I care?"

"It's like quicksilver, hard to hold."

North smiled. "Watch me!"

June pursed her lips. "Perhaps," she said thoughtfully, "it isn't good-bye."

"You mean you'll come—" began North excitedly.

The girl smiled faintly. "Don't jump to conclusions! I can't sell pies to the empty air. Will you buy me some good lots in Indian Flat—Bill?"

"And you'll follow the camp?"

"Perhaps!" her voice was tantalizing.

North leaned quickly across the narrow counter and grasped the girl's shoulders with both hands. "Say, June, if I make a killing up there, will you—would you—"

She met his eyes burning with eagerness, placidly shrugged free. "Bill!" There was a sharp note in her voice. "Please remember I'm still married. Later, perhaps!"

His hands dropped reluctantly. "Sometimes," he grumbled, "you remind me of a marble statue, beautiful, but no more emotion than a block of ice." He turned disconsolately towards the door.

"Wait!" cried June. She stepped back of the partition that screened off the kitchen, reappeared with a heavy leather pouch. Coin clinked as she dropped it on the counter. "A thousand dollars in gold," she said calmly, "to buy business lots. And give me a receipt please!"

"Whee!" whistled North. "There's real money in pies! You're an amazing girl, June, and elusive as a shadow, dammit!" He pocketed the pouch and penciled a receipt upon the writing tablet she pushed towards him. "And now how about a kiss—for luck?" he demanded.

June held out a cool right hand. "Good-bye, and good luck, Bill!" She spoke as impersonally as if selling a pie.

Deep inside, something irked Bill North as he pushed through the clamor of Main Street, headed for the Yard. He was treading the ties below his office before he realized just what it was. Not June's tepid response to his advances, or even the cool reminder that she was still married, but her insistence upon a receipt for the thousand dollars in gold that weighted his coat pocket. The longer he considered her request the more it irritated. True, it was wholly reasonable and businesslike, but it was plain proof that the blue-eyed June didn't trust him. Or else why should she demand written proof that she had given him the money? "June's a business woman," he told himself, angry at his own discontent. "She's had a hard struggle, and that pouch of gold is probably all she has to show for weeks of toil in front of a hot stove." But the memory rankled.

VALISE IN HAND, he stepped aboard the big yellow Concord. The usual crowd of loiterers gathered around when it jounced to a stop on broad leather springs, outside the Jewel Hotel. Saginaw Sam, the whiskered driver, wound the lines around the brake lever and jumped down. He grabbed the valise and pitched it into the boot. North sank back against the dusty cushions. It felt good to be out of Dutch Springs, with its booze and clamor and killings. Good, too, to be free of that railroad job where a fellow wore out his eyes and nervous system for the pittance the Chicago & Rio Grande paid, while all around him astute men were piling up fortunes. Gamblers' Gold, June had called it. Smart girl, that! She was right. The railroad gambled millions on pushing steel through to the Overland; the motley army of construction laborers gambled their lives on the job and their hard-earned dollars in their brief hours of ease; the proprietors of the saloons and joints gambled their wits. And the quickest witted cleaned up! He was through with watching other men make money, he'd grab his share—and Indian Flat was a good place to begin. That tip from Chicago had given him a head start on the "wise guys." He was a fool if he didn't cash in.

Conscious of a vast content, the young ex-paymaster gazed out of the little square window of the stage at the plankwalk, along which tight-packed groups of laborers eddied back and forth, joking and shouting, with full pockets and abiding thirsts. Poor fools, he thought, for a hundred tomorrows they'd be toiling in the scorching heat of the plains for their pigmy pay-checks, while he, he'd be in the money.

Saginaw's whip cracked and the ironbound wheels bit into the grit. As the stage started rolling, the door swung open and a tall man, in white linen duster, flung in. With distaste, North recognized Lerou, owner of The Bucket of Blood. The saloon man's features were still marred from the impact of the sheriff's hard fists. One eye was partially closed and wadding was secured by plaster on each side of his thin nose. He subsided on to the cushions opposite North with a gasp of relief. His small eyes darted over the big figure of his fellow passenger—and registered quick surprise. He nodded curtly, pulled a cigar from an inside pocket, bit off the end and lit up.

"Goin' far?" Lerou's high-pitched voice rasped North's nerves.

"Indian Flat," he replied shortly. Damn the fellow's inquisitiveness. No sense in lying to him, though. He'd

find out later and it might arouse his suspicions.

"H'm!" Lerou chewed his cigar. "Ain't you with the railroad?"

"I quit."

"Ain't much f'r a bright young feller like you in Indian Flat." The saloon keeper focussed searching eyes on the younger man's features.

North stifled his growing anger. This dive keeper reminded him of a buzzard with his hooded eyes and curved nose, except that he picked pockets instead of flesh. Caution warned him to keep his temper. A false move and Lerou would scent his motive for the trip.

"Anything for a change," he returned lightly. "Where are you headed for?"

"Indian Flat," rasped Lerou. His thin lips twisted maliciously, "For the same reason you are."

Cold premonition gripped North. "For a change of scenery?" His tone was guarded.

Lerou laughed. "Hell, no—to buy land."

Quick denial leapt to the young fellow's lips to be checked at sight of the derisive amusement in the saloon keeper's eyes.

"How do you know—" he began lamely, then stopped at Lerou's chuckle.

"Young feller, you ain't played much poker! You quit the Road in a hell of a hurry and hit the stage for Indian Flat. I jest put one and one together and they make Indian Flat the next construction camp. Me, I was ridin' up to visit a lady friend. Now I reckon it'll be a mighty profitable trip. Thanks f'r the tip—it's worth ten thousand to me."

MENTALLY, North cursed his luck in riding with the saloon keeper. Now the secret was out the wolf pack would dash for the Flat, to grab sites for their dives and dance halls. What a fool, he told himself bitterly, to allow the quick-witted Lerou to worm the secret out of him so easily.

Lerou's nasal tones cut into his chagrined silence. "Mebbe we could make a deal. We gotta chance to corner all the land around Indian Flat. There's a mint of money in it. I like you. You got guts, if you ain't got savvy."

North, already hot under the collar, exploded. "See here," he grated, "I detest you and the buzzards like you who clean out the pockets of the poor devils who lay steel. I'll mind my business and I'll thank you to keep your long nose—what Pat Stevens left of it—out of my affairs!"

A flush tinged the saloon man's sallow features. His eyes glinted, but his cigar glowed as evenly as ever. "So that's how it is!" his voice was mocking. "You're too simon-pure for the likes of me. Howcome you got coin to buy land, anyway?"

North's big fists knotted. "Another crack like that, Lerou, and I'll close that other eye."

The other smoked silently, calculating eyes steady on North's angry face. Not another word passed between them on the dusty thirty-mile trip to Indian Flat.

Creaking and swaying, the stage left the level prairie and wound up the flank of a low ridge, rattled over the boulders of a narrow canyon and dropped down into a discouraged cowtown simmering beneath gaunt cottonwoods.

Saginaw hauled his team to a standstill before a greying structure which a sign proclaimed to be The Traveller's Rest. North stepped down into the dust and gazed curiously around. The Traveller's Rest was the only two-story building in sight. Across the widening of the wagon road that formed the only street he saw a tumbledown saloon and a barber shop. A wagon was drawn up outside a long, squat building labelled McAllister's General Store and Post Office. Along the road squatted a few frame buildings and tin-roofed shacks. And that was all there was to Indian Flat.

Looked like June's thousand dollars would buy the entire town, thought North, as he toted his valise into the bare lobby of The Traveller's Rest.

A white-haired old fellow slowly hauled his bent frame out of a rocker, hobbled behind a counter and pushed a well-thumbed register forward. Con-

scious of Lerou's form in the background, North signed hastily. The ancient carelessly lifted the first of a bunch of keys dangling from a nail. "Number three," he wheezed. "Two dollars!"

North dropped the coins on the counter and regarded the labelled key with quizzical amusement. "Sure this is the right key?" he inquired.

"They's all the same," snapped the oldster. "Saves time and trouble."

North picked up his bag and mounted a stairway. At its head was the usual corridor, with rudely numbered doors, like rows of cells, on either side. He entered No. 3, threw open the window to circulate the hot, stagnant air. This done, he dumped his valise on the iron bedstead, eyed the cracked water pitcher and battered dresser, and scaled his hat towards the valise. Then he sat gingerly in the more substantial of the two straight-backed chairs to consider his plan of campaign. Better go slow, he mused, or these musty old-timers will smell a rat.

He heard Lerou's footsteps on the bare stairway, his quick nervous steps along the corridor. Outside, they paused. The door eased slightly open and the saloon man's dented features appeared.

"Just bought the hotel, North," he rasped. "Thought I'd put you wise—save your time." The door closed with a bang that rattled the partitions.

In stunned surprise the young fellow gazed at the paintless door. He heard Lerou enter a room further down the corridor, grabbed his hat off the bed and headed for the sun-swept street.

CHAPTER XIV

SHADOWS shrouded the melancholy cottonwoods when North finally returned to the rude hospitality of The Travellers' Rest, tired, dusty, but well pleased. From the grizzled old Scotchman at the store he had acquired a section bordering the wagon road north of town. Sight of glittering gold eagles had induced the barber to part with half a dozen lots next to his shack, and North had a line on the owners of several other pieces to be followed up on the morrow.

He stripped off coat and shirt, poured warmish water from the pitcher into the white china wash basin and sloshed the prickling dust from his head and chest. Towelling vigorously, he swung around in surprise as the door hinges squeaked. Unbelievingly, he dabbed the water out of his eyes, goggled at the visitor in open-mouthed amazement—vivid in crimson shirtwaist, an artificial rose splotched against the rich brown glory of her hair, stood Maggie Maloney.

For several moments North could do no more than gape. Then he remembered Lerou's remark on the stage explaining his trip. Mentally, he cursed his obtuseness. If he hadn't been wrapt up in rosy dreams of money-making, he would have guessed the identity of the lady friend.

"It's me—in person! You look like I was ghost." Maggie nonchalantly sank into a chair beside the bed. "Well, what are lots selling for today, Mr. Capitalist?"

North recovered his aplomb. Questions swirled in his mind. What was behind this visit? Had Lerou sent his lady friend to worm more information out of him? Or was she playing a game of her own? Dammit, she was pretty. Not the chaste, serene beauty of June Larsen, but a warm, passionate beauty, enhanced by the tantalizing invitation in her dark eyes and the curve of her roguish lips. June might have the cold perfection of a lily, but Maggie brought the exhilaration of a scarlet rose. Inconsequently, he wondered if Maggie would have demanded a written receipt for her money.

North tossed the towel to one side, fished for his pipe and stretched out on the other chair. If this was to be a contest of wits, he'd endeavor to hold his own—Lerou had made a fool out of him once, and once was plenty.

"How's your friend's eye—and nose?" he inquired genially.

Maggie shrugged. "You mean Le-

rou? Any change in his fish face would be an improvement."

"Thought he was a—close friend of yours," he commented meaningly.

Storm signals flared in Maggie's eyes. "See here, big boy, another crack like that and I'll damage your good looks. Lerou's my boss and I boss his dance hall and kid his customers. As a man,"—she wrinkled her nose—"he stinks."

"Pure as the driven snow!" murmured North.

"As pure as that moon-faced cow in the pie shop you're so sweet on," she flashed.

Quick color leapt to the young fellow's face. "Leave June out of this," he replied stiffly.

"Crazy over angel-face, ain't you?" mocked Maggie. "And she's got as much use for you as she has for a worn-out shoe. Wise up! She's stuck on that bronco-busting husband who used to quirt the lights out of her."

North jerked out of his chair, face white with anger. "See here," he choked. "You're not fit to lick June's boots. Get out of here before I throw you out!"

MAGGIE gained her feet as effortlessly as a kitten. Angry lights glimmered in the dark pools of her eyes. Defiantly, she faced North's big form, towering above her. "Listen, if you've got the guts to take it!" Her husky voice deepened with intensity. "June Larsen meets her husband most every night out behind the pie shop. They kiss and slobber over each other like a coupla lovesick kids. Now throw me out!"

North brushed past her, flung open the door. "Get!" The cryptic command came in a strained whisper.

"It hurts, doesn't it?" she jeered. "First June, then Lerou makes a fool out of you. Between them, they'll skin you and nail your hide to the wall. Good night, softie!" Maggie swung past him, swayed round at the door. "And if you're interested," there was a curious intensity in her bantering tones, "Lerou has room number ten and I have number seven, on the opposite side of the passageway, and I don't loan my key."

He slammed the door in her face.

Still quivering with the anger Maggie's taunting words had aroused, he paced the strip of carpet between window and door. Why had she revealed her presence at The Travellers' Rest? She must have known he'd report it to Sheriff Stevens the moment he returned to Dutch Springs. She was a fugitive from justice, a vampire of the dives who sucked the dollars from fools and threw them aside when their pockets were emptied. A fit companion for men like Lerou.

Calmer now, he refilled his pipe, but questions still hurtled into his brain. What was Maggie's real purpose in coming to his room? And her jealousy of June? Wonder if she told the truth about June's love for her husband? After all, she'd never given him any real encouragement. Maggie sure was a good-looker! Full of fire. If she hadn't hit the dance-hall trail she might have made some fellow a wonderful wife.

Oddly disturbed, he stared out of the unwashed window. "Never loaned her key?" As if he would want to borrow it!

Three days would pass before the lumbering Concord, on its return trip down Valley, would pick up passengers at Indian Flat. Bill North determined to make the most of every hour.

Spurred by Lerou's competition, and determined, for reasons he could not fathom, to justify himself in Maggie's eyes, he hired a saddle horse. From sun-up to sunset, he rode the range around the little settlement, buying every acre of sand and sage that the sight of gold would persuade dazed owners to relinquish. The comment of one leathery-faced old desert rat, as he signed away his hundred and sixty acres was typical: "Reckon yore loco, son. This range ain't worth a dollar an acre, but ef you are hell-bent tuh pay twenty, it's yourn."

Money belt lighter, but with a vast content, North hunched over the dresser in his stuffy hotel room late in the evening of the second day, and tallied his newly acquired holdings. He had seen nothing more of Maggie and little of Lerou. The saloon man

had been busy. North had seen him driving around in the barber's buckboard, but their trails had not crossed.

North checked his lots and acreage with a pencil, sketched them on a rough map. His face creased in a triumphant grin. There wasn't much left for Lerou. Beyond the hotel and a few town lots, it looked like he had crowded the saloon man out of the picture. Well, tomorrow he'd hit the stage and record his deals at the County Courthouse in Dutch Springs. Then, when news of the new camp seeped out and a pack of land-hungry wolves dashed to Indian Flat, they'd find they were shut out. They'd have to come to him before they could build saloons, erect their tents, throw up their frowsy dives. And he'd set the price!

So absorbed was he in the pleasant picture that he did not hear the door ease open and Maggie Maloney slip in. His head swivelled with a startled jerk at her discreet cough.

AN ANGRY exclamation trembled on his lips, to die as he gazed at his visitor with growing perplexity. It was the same shapely Maggie but subtly different. Her thick chestnut hair was neatly coiled around her head, innocent of artificial flowers and jewelled combs. She wore a plain shirtwaist of pale orange, fastened high against her white throat with a plain gold brooch. A neat dark skirt swept her small shoes. Her dark eyes burned against pale features, innocent of rouge, but her red lips still held their challenging, defiant quirk.

"You better listen before you kick me out again!" Her husky voice was low.

With a puzzled frown, North gathered his papers and dropped them into the valise. This new Maggie was singularly appealing.

"Come in!" he invited uncertainly.

"I'm in!" Maggie leaned back against the closed door. Abruptly, she flung a question. "You'll catch the stage for Dutch Springs tomorrow?"

He nodded, an explanation for the visit breaking upon him—she wanted to seal his lips about her presence in Indian Flat. Sheriff Stevens would be on her trail like a bloodhound.

"And you'll record all the land you've bought around this neck of the woods?"

"Sure!"

She laughed. "My Gawd, you're catsmeat for a guy like Lerou!"

North frowned. "I don't get it!"

Maggie made a hopeless gesture with her hands. He noticed with surprise that they were as slim and white as June's.

"You wouldn't! In this game you got about as much chance as a newborn lamb against a wolf. The stage leaves here at noon. Lerou's got a good saddle horse in the barn back of this joint, and he pulls out at daybreak. He'll beat your time to Dutch Springs by six hours."

"Well, what of it?" North fingered his chin in puzzlement.

"What of it—sucker!" Maggie's tone sparkled the old vibrant fire. "He'll record most everything you think you've bought."

"But he can't—I've paid in gold, I have the owner's signatures." expostulated the young ex-paymaster, with growing disquiet.

"Say, he's been dogging you. Paid twice what you paid—and cheap at that. Every release he's got is dated two days ahead of yours. He'll record first. When you get there, they'll give you the horse laugh—or jug you for misrepresentation, or forgery, or something."

"But they can't do that!" North gestured towards his valise. "I have the evidence."

Maggie laughed, a hard laugh. "What can you do? The land's already recorded in Lerou's name. These hicks will claim lapse of memory and give you your money back—if you can catch 'em."

"I'll sue the crooks!" snapped North.

"And then what? Lerou will hire a good lawyer and keep the case from trial for six months or more. Then if you will, he'll appeal—and appeal. By the time it's settled, steel will be out of the valley and he'll give you the land—for nothing. That's just about what it will be worth when the camp moves on again."

North jumped nervously to his feet, advanced to meet the girl still standing by the door. "Won't you have a seat?" he inquired, shamefacedly.

"I was wondering when you'd get around to asking me," returned Maggie dryly. She sat down sedately.

"Look here," he barked, swinging towards her. "All this is just a crazy dream. It's not possible!"

"Say," her voice was pitying, "you're in a fight now where no holds are barred. There's big money in this, and anything's possible, even a stab in the back."

North strode back and forth, his mind in a whirl. The revelation that the girl, quietly watching him from the chair, had made, was incredible. Laws were made to prevent such bald-faced theft as this. Yet, the longer he considered it, the more plausible Lerou's play became. The law was on his side, but before its slow-moving machinery ground out justice, months would pass. Lerou would have re-sold the land and skipped to heaven knows where.

A sudden suspicion stabbed him—why had Maggie betrayed her boss? Was this another of Lerou's tricks?

He met Maggie's eyes—then feverishly began to throw his toilet articles into the valise.

"What's the big idea?" droned the girl lazily.

"I'm riding into Dutch Springs, right now."

"At last he shows a glimmer of common sense," she murmured.

"Where's Lerou?" North flung over his shoulder.

"Grabbing some sleep."

North strapped his valise, grabbed his hat off a nail and headed for the door. Maggie rose.

He paused beside her, fidgetting uncertainly.

"I don't know why you did this," he began doubtfully. "I don't understand it at all, but—" faltering, he glanced down into the limpid mystery of Maggie's dark eyes. Quickly, he bent and kissed her soft lips.

Her swinging hand stung his sunburned cheek.

North jerked erect, his eyes watering from the smart of the slap, blinked in amazement at the white blur of her face.

"Get out!" Maggie's voice was throaty with anger. "I may be a Judas, but you can keep your Judas kisses!"

CHAPTER XV

DUTCH SPRINGS was veritably a ghost town when Bill North eased his laboring pony past its flimsy facades in the early morning hours. The moon bathed silent Main Street with cold white light. Wan shafts of yellow steamed from The Gold Eagle. North glanced through the windows as his mount dragged past and he glimpsed an intent group hunched around a card table. The ever-open doorway of The Bucket of Blood yawned black in the shadows. A drunk stirred sluggishly in the gutter.

He pushed on to the Yard. Unless replacements for the Paymaster's office had come through, there were two empty bunks in the freight car. At the worst he could snatch a few hours' sleep on the floor.

Stiff-limbed and weary, he piled out of leather at the sleeping car and hammered on the sliding door. Geoffrey Glencourt, tousle-headed and frowsy eyed, finally slid it open and stared out owlishly.

"Hello Jeff! Stiff as usual!" greeted North.

"My dear—hic—fellow. I am not—hic—drunk, merely sleepy," corrected Glencourt solemnly. "This is a most unearthly hour to make a—hic—social call."

"I want a bed."

"Then come in," yawned the other, "but leave the—hic—horse outside."

North watered his pony in the mule lines, stripped off the saddlery and tied it behind the car. Pulling off his boots, he hoisted his aching limbs into the empty bunk with a vast thankfulness. Glencourt was already snoring.

In the brilliant sunlight of mid-morning, North ducked into June Larsen's pie shop. The little store was radiant with sunshine and the ex-

paymaster was in a radiant mood. Shaved, a hearty breakfast beneath his belt and his real estate deals on record, he literally exuded satisfaction.

"Back again, June!" he shouted boisterously, clanking a half empty pouch on the counter.

"Did you buy my lots?" asked the girl, with a questioning glance at the pouch.

Her cool reception damped North's soaring spirits like a douse of cold water. His grin faded. "I did," he replied stiffly. "Six, on the main street, such as it is, six hundred dollars, all recorded in your name."

"That's sweet of you!" June smiled for the first time. "Thanks—Bill!"

But the zest had gone out of the young ex-paymaster. "Pretty as a picture and a dollar sign for a heart," he thought moodily. "It was a pleasure," he growled. "There's four hundred dollars, gold, in that pouch, and I'd like a receipt."

June's blue eyes opened wide. "You're not—angry?"

"No, just businesslike," he returned curtly. "Hadn't you better step over to the Courthouse and check the records?"

"Bill!" Her voice was reproachful, but a half-smile lingered about her firm lips. "I suppose you bought up the town. Tell me all about it!"

North thawed beneath the caress in her clear voice and the eagerness in her eyes. "Not much to tell," he grumbled. "I've just about bought up the burg. Had some competition—that Lerou fellow was on the job, too."

"How could he know?" she breathed, hanging on to his words. "I never breathed a word to anyone."

"My fault," North admitted ruefully, and told her of the incident in the stage, and his subsequent clash at the hotel. He was careful, however, to omit all mention of Maggie—women never did understand one another!

"So you're on the road to a fortune!" Homage trembled on June's awed tones.

"It doesn't seem as though I could miss." It was difficult to keep complacency out of his voice.

June fondled the sagging leather pouch with slim fingers, clinking the contents with pursed lips.

"Would you think me an awful hog if I asked a favor?" she inquired softly.

North succumbed to the old fascination. "Shoot!" he beamed.

"Could I have some more lots for this money?"

Once again he recoiled beneath a stabbing pang of doubt. Just what thoughts were passing behind those calm blue eyes? Had she any use for him at all, except as a tool? But a glance at her pleading face erased the suspicion. After all, he could afford to be generous, he had land aplenty tied up. He pulled a folded sheet out of his pocket, smoothed it out on the counter. It was the rough map of his acquisitions in Indian Flat.

"How would this piece suit your ladyship?" He jabbed his forefinger on a piece near the hotel.

"Splendid!" enthused the girl. "Why you own all the land around. That makes us neighbors!"

"Say June!" Impulsively, his big hand covered hers. "Why not partners?"

"Some day, perhaps," she returned hurriedly. "Now run over to the Recorder's office like a good boy, and make the transfer."

NORTH met lean, grey-shirted Pat Stevens on the Courthouse steps.

"Figgered you'd pulled outta this ungodly hole," drawled Pat. "Heard you'd quit the railroad and hit for Indian Flat. Run across sign of Maggie?"

North shook his head in vigorous denial.

"Heard a whisper she might be around the Flat. Reckon I'll ride up and take a looksee. Wal, wal, look who's heah!"

Covered with a mantle of dust, Lerou pulled up at the hitch rail and carefully swung out of the saddle.

"Saddle-sore," chuckled Pat. "He shook the stage thataways, too."

Lerou mounted the wide wooden

steps with quick, eager paces, glanced sharply at the two men—stopped abruptly in his tracks as though he had encountered an invisible wall.

"Morning, Lerou!" sang out North cheerfully.

The saloon man stared at the tall young ex-paymaster as though unable to believe the evidence of his eyes.

"You're too late, mister," added North blandly. "I'm recorded."

For a full minute the saloon man stood immobile, small eyes darting from North's smiling features to the sheriff's impassive countenance. Then, without further word, he passed them and pushed open the Courthouse door.

"'Peared like he was considerable surprised," commented the sheriff, eying his companion curiously.

"Surprised!" North grinned as he turned to follow Lerou. "He nearly dropped dead."

Lerou was throwing questions at the clerk behind the wicket in the Recorder's office when North entered the big bare room on the second floor. The young fellow stood back, waiting. Lerou pushed through some documents to be recorded, turned and approached the man who had outsmarted him. North tensed, braced for trouble, but Lerou had recovered his aplomb. There was an expression akin to respect in his hooded eyes as he stepped close.

"So you grabbed the jackpot!" he rasped.

North nodded warily.

"Guess I figured you wrong." Lerou's voice was puzzled. "You're slick! Well, I grabbed quite a slice. Say we got to get together!"

"I'm holding everything," declared North decisively.

"Who's asking for a cut?" demanded the saloon man impatiently. "This is our big chance to clean up—if we jack up prices. Jest as soon as the grape vine gets it, there'll be a stampede to Indian Flat. We got it sewed up—and we gotta sell high. No undercutting. Get me?"

North nodded, weighing the other's words and half suspecting a trick.

"Look!" Lerou poked a bony finger into the younger man's vest. "You're smart, but you're green. Me, I know this racket. Don't sell a square yard for a month, maybe two months. Make 'em sweat. The bunch u'll go crazy. They gotta buy what we got or be shut out. Make the suckers pay, plenty. Get me?"

"I'm trying to figure how you get me," returned North brusquely.

"Forget it!" snapped Lerou.

"I'm not quite a big enough fool to believe you have my interests at heart."

"To hell with your interests!" The saloon man's voice was cold. "You cut prices and you hurt me. The higher you sell the higher I can sell. We got to get together. Savvy?"

North nodded doubtfully.

"Then let's work together! No sales for two months. We tip each other off before we make a deal."

"Suits me!"

"Hunky-dory! Young Feller, get set to make a killing!"

Lerou turned away and disappeared through the doorway with a quick catlike step. North completed the routine of transferring June's additional piece of land, then followed slowly, pondering on the dive keeper's proposition with furrowed brow. Intuition warned him against any kind of cooperation with the hatchet-faced Lerou, but common sense seemed to dictate it. How could he lose? Dammit, the road to Easy Street promised to be anything but smooth.

SIGHT OF THE sheriff, still lounging by the Courthouse steps, recalled Maggie to his mind. Her recapture was sure if Pat Stevens rode up to Indian Flat. Subtly, his feelings towards the dark-eyed belle of The Bucket of Blood had changed. He stood irresolutely on the plank-walk. At least he owed her a chance to escape after what she had done for him. But how could he get word to her? The stage wouldn't go through again for three days. He could ride to Indian Flat, but that might arouse the gimlet-eyed sheriff's suspicions. Uncertainly, he drifted past saloons and bawdy houses. A banging and rattling from the street

attracted his attention. Behind a team of husky Missouri mules a tarpaulin covered wagon jolted over the ruts, piled high with pots, pans, saddlery, bales of merchandise. On the box sat a smooth-featured young fellow the keen eyes and a curved nose.

Inspiration hit North. He ducked beneath the hitch rail, hailed the range peddler, with upraised arm.

"Heading for Indian Flat?" he bawled.

The peddler checked his team. "You said it, mister!"

"It's worth five dollars to me if you deliver a letter to The Travellers' Rest before sunset."

For a moment the peddler hesitated, shrewd eyes on North's excited face. He spread his hands expressively, "Before sunset, ten dollars, mister."

"It's a deal!" snapped North. He searched his pockets. The peddler twisted his lines around the brake lever and slid down. "You lost your letter?" he inquired politely.

"No, I need paper and pencil to write it."

The peddler's hand dove beneath the flapping tarpaulin, delved into a box. He pulled out a cardboard package. "Beautiful linen stationery, envelopes and two nice pencils—one dollar!" he beamed.

North threw him a coin, broke open the package. Leaning against the wagon box, he wrote his note, addressed the envelope and sealed it.

He placed it in the peddler's ready palm, with a gold eagle, then stood hesitantly eyeing the open package of stationery.

The young ex-paymaster glanced down the street. Sheriff Stevens was hunkered on the Courthouse steps, smoking lazily as he watched the passing throng. "Too far for him to see me," thought North with relief, "with all this dust and confusion." He stood back, watched the peddler whip up his team, then headed into The Jewel Hotel to book a room. Now that the tension was relieved, and the effects of the thirty-mile ride and long hours without sleep made themselves felt, his limbs felt as though they were loaded with lead. He yawned as he plodded slowly up the stairway. What did it matter, anyway, all he had to do from now on was eat, sleep and draw golden dividends.

The peddler's wagon clanked along dusty Main Street. Pat Stevens rose leisurely as it rolled past the Courthouse. Strolled across the front of the nodding mules, raised his hand. For a second time the peddler hauled on the lines.

"Lemme see thet note, Ike!" drawled the sheriff.

"Note!" The peddler's voice was shrill with astonishment.

"Yep, the note the tall young feller passed."

Ike stretched out long arms in indignant protest. "I swear, by the prophets, he bought a beautiful package of stationery, for one dollar. Maybe I could sell you a package a leetle damaged—half price."

"Ike!" returned Pat, with weary patience. "I ain't in a bargaining mood. They's a nice clean cell behind the Courthouse. Lemme see thet note or I'll jug yuh—aiding and abetting a criminal to escape the due process of the law."

Ike's arms dropped in despair. He met the sheriff's stern grey eyes, his shoulders lifted philosophically and he fished North's letter from an inner pocket.

Pat glanced at the hastily scrawled address— "Miss Maggie Maloney, The Travellers' Rest, Indian Flat." With expressionless features, he handed it back. "So-long, Ike!" he grunted, and headed for the livery barn.

CHAPTER XVI

INDIAN FLAT wilted before the fiery breath of the midday sun when Pat's pony stirred the dust of the wagon road.

"'Lo Tim!" he flung casually towards the ancient dozing in a rocker beneath the canopy of The Travellers' Rest. "How's business?"

The oldster blinked and yawned. "Stage dumped off two locoed jaspers from Dutch Springs. They done bought up the whole danged country,

then split the breeze like the devil was on their tails. Mighty pretty gal, too, drifted in. She rattled her hocks at sun-up. Queer goings on, ef you ask me."

The sheriff grunted with annoyance. Once again Maggie Maloney had slipped away. "Whar'd she bunk?" he inquired.

"Room seven," Tim stretched lazily. "Take any key—they all fit."

Pat lifted a key off the nail and jingled upstairs. Room seven was cleaned up, ready for occupancy. The bed was made, threadbare carpet swept, jug filled with water.

The sheriff dropped down on his knees, peered beneath the sagging springs of the iron bedstead. As he expected, Tim's sweeping was perfunctory. A soiled handkerchief was balled by the wall. Pat retrieved it from the accumulated dust and fluff, sniffed it. Maggie's Odor d'Amour!

From the carpet around the dresser he gathered several stray hairpins. With this evidence of the fugitive's occupancy, he hit for the lobby.

Outside, Tim still dozed.

"Whar was the gal headin' for?" inquired Pat, settling down beside him.

"B'damned if I know. The long nosed gink rode out with her."

"Lerou," murmured the sheriff, "and he rode in alone. Wal," he straightened. "Reckon I'll mosey along the back trail. Be seein' yuh!"

Shadows crept across the flats when the conglomeration of tents and clapboards that smothered Dutch Springs came into sight. The travel-stained sheriff piled out of leather before the Courthouse. Sam paced the office, behind the boarded window frames, as restless as a cat on a hot stove. At the sound of the sheriff's step on the gravel outside he charged through the doorway.

"They got it agen!" he announced tersely.

"The payroll?"

"You bet yore boots! Jake Pearce sent word an hour back. Says tuh hotfoot f'r the Yard."

Pat swung round, again forked the jaded sorrel.

Illuminated by flares, an engine panted on the siding outside the pay office. A curious crowd of construction men were gathered round. Coupled to the engine were Express car and caboose. The entire side of the Express car was twisted and shattered. A glance told Pat the story—powder charge.

Jake Pearce pushed past the loungers, chewing a cold cigar. "Nicked us again." he grunted. "In broad daylight, too! Come over to the office. I got the Wells Fargo man in there."

Pat dogged him into the Paymaster's office. A heavy-built man hunched disconsolately in a chair. His broad forehead was disfigured by a huge black-and-yellow bruise. The hair was singed off his head and eyebrows, making him resemble a caricature of a newly born baby. His blue shirt was patched with powder burns.

"Meet Sheriff Stevens, Markson," grunted Pearce. He dropped heavily into a chair. "Spill the yarn again!"

"Ain't much t'tel.." The Express man's voice was flat and lifeless. "Ten-twelve miles down Valley a herd on the track pulled us up. Some jaspers with white masks threw down on the engineer and fireman, uncoupled the engine and pulled ahead. I heard shots from the caboose, then a white-masked guy yells for me to open up. I gave him a load of buckshot. Next thing the whole danged car blew up and I passed out. When I come to the engineer was dousing water over me."

Pat turned to the Pinkerton man, who was puffing his cigar in disgusted silence. "How about the guards?"

"Two, in the caboose. Both plugged."

"Any clues?"

Pearce dug into his pocket and produced a wadded linen handkerchief, pitched it to the sheriff. Even as he caught the ball of linen, Pat recognized the scent. "Maggie!" he ejaculated. He eyed the damning piece of evidence thoughtfully. "soaked with thet blamed Odor d'Armour. 'Pears like she wanted tuh be sure we'd know she was there—the hell-cat! Anything else?"

The detective fumbled in his vest pocket, pulled out a small bone hairpin.

Pat eyed it curiously.. "Kin I hang on tuh this—and the wipe?"

Pearce nodded morosely.

"Train crew lamp anything?"

"Five hombres, riding west."

"By now they're so deep in the Barrens we couldn't dig'em out before doomsday." Pat rose. "Wal, reckon I'll drift."

BACK IN TOWN, he left his pony in the livery barn to be watered and grained. Sam itching for action, was still pacing the office.

Pat told him the sparse details of the latest outrage.

"What'll we do about it?" demanded the squat rider.

"Hit f'r the Circle L," returned Pat shortly. "I gamble Nels Larsen had a hand in this."

Beneath the serene, star-studded canopy of the heavens, the two riders tied their ponies in the brush and ghosted towards the Circle L ranch house. By its appearance it might have been untenanted for a hundred years. The big barn behind the house towered gaunt and spectral. Bats circled noiselessly. The quiet was unbroken save for the faint incessant splashing of water at the spring and the intermittent chorus of croaking frogs.

The two lawmen gained the side of the silent house and injuned round towards the door. It creaked open under the pressure of the sheriff's hand. With cocked guns they slid into the darkness. Nothing stirred. Pat struck a match. The tiny flare revealed nothing save the crude, dust-covered furniture.

"We drawed a blank!' Pat grinned at the disgust that spiced Sam's sharp comment.

"Plenty time f'r action yet," he drawled. "Reckon we'll bunk down t' sun-up—in the attic."

Pat boosted his short pard through the aperture in the kitchen ceiling, hoisted his own lean body up behind him. At each end of the attic, the square windowless holes showed grey in the gloom. From a corner came a faint drone from a nest of hornets.

Pat crawled across the rough planks until he lay over what he judged was the center of the living room below. With his Barlow knife he set to work whittling a small hole between two planks. Sam sprawled out in the darkness beside him.

It was warm in the confined space beneath the sloping roof, and the hour was late. As the sheriff whittled away industriously, he heard his pard's deep, regular breathing. "Sam!" he called softly. But Sam was sound asleep.

Pat finished the job to his satisfaction and pocketed his knife. From force of habit, his right hand strayed for the makin's in the pocket of his shirt. He checked the impulse. If anyone entered the room below, the scent of tobacco smoke would be a sure giveaway.

The sheriff rolled over on his back, relaxing gratefully, and reviewed the events of the past few hours. It was plain Maggie had been using The Travellers' Rest for a hideaway. Both Lerou and North had apparently got wind of the fact that Indian Flat was to be the site of the new construction camp, and had bought up every available piece of land. North's part was puzzling. He was a sworn enemy of Lerou and the dance-hall girl yet he had ridden out with Lerou and had sent the girl warning. But, reasoned the sheriff, he could not have been working in cahoots with her, else why should he have sent the note, well knowing she would have left the hideout long before it would arrive? Pat sighed, it was a mix-up, the whole damned business, from the murder of Mark Wizner to the latest hold-up, was a mix-up. Why did Maggie drop that scent-soaked handkerchief in the wrecked Express car. Was it an accident, or a challenge? Or was it Maggie who dropped it?

For awhile he lay, half-dozing, Sam's heavy breathing in his ears. Then, through the brooding quiet outside, drifted the faint but unmistakeable tinkle of a bit chain. The sheriff snapped into wakefulness. With mounting excitement, he heard the

soft crunch of ponies' hooves on the sandy earth, the jingle of spur chains, muffled voices outside. He wriggled over to the hole he had whittled in the floor boards.

He heard the door creak open, was aware of men moving in the darkened room below. The sound of Sam's breathing seemed magnified as the sheriff strained his ears to follow the movements of the mysterious intruders. Pat nudged his sleeping pard with his boot, as he caught the glimmer of a match through his peephole and heard a faint tinkle as the chimney of the oil lamp was removed. He tingled with anticipation—in another minute the lamp would alight and he could identify the intruders..

Sam awoke with a snort, one of his feet hit the hornet's nest. A droning angry buzz and Sam's yell of anguish as the stinging furies swarmed over him rent the night. Pat, too, was fighting off the buzzing horde.

Quick silence fell on the room below. Then the roar of a forty-five filled the house and a slug ripped through the planks.

PAT JUMPED up, hit his head a resounding thump against the roof, reeled, half-stunned, while more guns crashed and bullets whined around him.

Sam fired a shot through the floor, bumped against the sheriff.

"Le's go!" snapped Pat, hauling Sam towards the nearer window with one hand and fending off hornets with the other.

Wide awake now, Sam wriggled backwards through the window, hung by his hand and dropped to the ground below. Crouching against the wall, gun in hand, he waited. Pat dropped beside him. Indistinct in the semi-darkness, a fast moving figure rounded the house. Sam's gun spat fire. The figure jerked to a stop, swayed, staggered back out of range.

"Hit f'r the brush!" barked Pat.

The pair broke from the shelter of the house. To their left stood the big barn, ahead were the corrals, behind which the brush bunched thick. They crossed the stretch of starlit open ground, running hard and dodging from left to right. More gun flashes blossomed behind them. Lead moaned through the night and spat viciously into the earth around their flying feet.

Sam reached the corral, ducked between the rails. Pat, at his heels, loosed two shots at the gun-fanning group whose dark figures loomed against the ranch house.

The two raced along inside the rails, plunged through on the further side. Another breathless spurt and they crashed into the welcome cover of the chaparral.

Branches whipping their faces, they pushed on, until the spread was hidden by undergrowth. Their pursuers' fire slackened, ceased. Once again deep quiet enveloped the Circle L.

Sam stopped, panting. "Gawd!" he gasped, "what a stampede! Lead a-buzzin' like hornets, and hornets stingin' worse'n lead." He ruefully fingered his swollen features.

"Dogblastit!" exploded the sheriff, "Yore no more help than a blind mule, sicking a nest of hornets unto us jest when I was going tuh get wise tuh them galoots."

"Say!' groaned his squat pard. "I thought I was in hell, wrastling ten thousand devils. I'm all swelled up like a pisoned pup. Now what'll we do?"

"Set tight. And f'r gosh sakes don't stir up a pasel of rattlers!"

"Nuthin' kin sting worse'n them measly hornets," returned Sam feelingly.

Peering through the interlaced brush, the pair watched the house. Shadowy figures moved around the yard and, after awhile, a blurred file of riders dropped down towards the aspen grove and faded into the night.

"Le's go!" The sheriff stealthily moved forward.

"Back tuh thet hornet hell!" wailed Sam. "No siree, gimme the rattlers!" But Pat was already ghosting towards the corral. His squat pard groaned and hastened in his wake.

The Circle L was as dead and deserted as when they first entered. Pat lit the glass-bowled lamp on the table. His eyes searched the room. A tiny lace-bordered handkerchief lay on the bearskin rug. The sheriff

gathered it up. No need to sniff it, the reek of Odor D'Amour filled the room.

He tossed it to Sam. The latter's features, misshapen from hornet stings, screwed up in disgust. "Reckon Maggie left her callin' card!"

"The gal is shore set tuh let the world know she's a bold bad bandit," commented Pat thoughtfully. He blew down the glass-funnelled lamp and the room was plunged into darkness. "Le's rustle our ponies and hit f'r home."

NEXT MORNING the sheriff washed down his customary stack of flapjacks with black coffee at the Chink's. He rolled a smoke, slid off the stool and drifted across Main Street. Despite his protests, Pat had packed his pard home to his ranch. The squat rider needed a wife's care, the sheriff decided. A mess of hornet stings was no joke.

Quick, angry footsteps pattered outside the leanto as he settled down at his desk. June Larsen swung through the doorway, storm signals in her usually placid blue eyes.

"A thief has broken into my store," she announced her clear voice vibrating with anger. "The whole place has been turned upside down, my personal belongings are scattered everywhere."

"Grab any coin?"

"No, thank heaven! My money was hidden, and the skulking coyote never nosed it out."

"So he busted in f'r nothing! Wal, June, guess he won't come agen."

"But he did take something," objected the girl.

"Yeah?" Pat eyed her with interest. "Sich as?"

"Well, small personal belongings, nothing of real value."

Pat rose. "Want I should look over the place?" A thought struck him. "Say, don't you bunk behind the store?"

A quick flush stained the clear skin of June's cheeks. For a moment her troubled eyes met his, then dropped. "Usually, I do," she admitted hesitantly, "but occasionally I ride up to the old Circle L line camp near Finger Rock."

"And spend the night with yore husband?"

"Yes." Her voice was faint.

"Yore still in love with thet jasper?"

June nodded mutely.

"And last night he didn't show up?"

Her eyes widened. "How did you know?"

The sheriff chuckled. "You'd be surprised how much an old wart hog like yours truly gits tuh know. Wal, June, I reckon you better sleep with a shotgun from now on."

"I always do," replied the blue-eyed girl tersely.

CHAPTER XVII

AFTER JUNE'S departure, the sheriff gave himself to thought. Feet cocked on the much-abused desk, door wide open to admit light, he slid down comfortably in his swivel chair and frowned at the boarded-up windows.

Langard's lank form blocked the doorway. "'Lo, Wes!" greeted Pat, "I kin use you." He waved the oldtimer to a chair. Briefly, he told of the cached loot at the Circle L and his misadventures with Sam the previous night.

"You gather up three good men," he concluded, "and stick around the Circle L. Post a lookout on Coyote Ridge. Ef trouble brews, signal him, yuh kin send up smoke by day or flash a lamp at night. He kin hightail for town and I'll be out with a posse pronto."

Wes nodded. "Do we bring Nels in?" he queried.

Pat smiled. "Shore, if yuh corral him but I'll stake my saddle agenst yore Stetson, you'll never set eyes on the jasper. Larsen's a slippery side-winder."

Ezra was the next to drift in. He spread his huge form over a straight-back chair and chuckled deep in his throat. "You orta see Sam! The little runt is as techy as a bronc with saddle burrs. Both peepers closed and his mug swollen up like a pot-bellied maverick. Kitty's plastered poultices all over his map and he's spittin' worse'n a wildcat. Seems like you

jaspers stirred up plenty hornets last night."

"We'd had the payroll gang dead tuh rights, ef Sam hadn't done kicked over thet hornets' nest," admitted Pat with a twisted grin. "But I gotta line on Nels. Seems like June's crazy over the galoot, meets him in a line shack near Finger Rock. She won't ride out agen, seein' I'm wise, but I gamble Nels rides in. I want him! From now on you keep cases on the pie shop. When Nels drifts in, we'll corral the lobo. Ef June rides, trail her!"

The sheriff had yet another visitor before the sun rode high—Jake Pearce. The ruddy-faced Pinkerton man strolled in, plumped into a seat and regarded Pat with gloomy eyes.

"Any line on the coin?" he inquired.

"Jest a hunch," admitted the sheriff. "Right now I'm betting my shirt on it—ef it proves a winner, it'll knock yore hat off."

"As how?" Pearce's eyes brightened. He leaned forward eagerly.

Pat chuckled. "I may be a danged fool, Jake, but I'm not spreading my hand—yet awhile."

The detective chewed the cigar that projected from his mouth in silence. "If we don't make an arrest that'll stick," he declared finally, "I might just as well hand in my badge, they'll lift it, anyway. A murder, two train holdups, three payrolls melted into thin air—and we set around!"

Pat wriggled deeper into his swivel chair. "Me, I think faster when I set."

Pearce snorted. "Headquarters craves action. They're sure burning up the wires." He spread his hands. "What more can I do? I got two men combing the hills, another planted in The Bucket of Blood and two more drifting around the dives. And the whole damn crew ain't caught a whisper. This bunch of bandits is so tight-mouthed they can't scarcely breathe."

"Nothing on Lerou?" asked Pat thoughtfully.

"Not a thing!"

"Figger where North got the coin tuh buy land around Indian Flat?"

"Not from the Chicago & Rio Grande. I checked his record—way back. It's clean."

"Wal, we know Nels Larsen is in deep. Blondy's already paid with her life for her part, and it don't look good for Maggie. I guess we jest gotta mosey along," murmured Pat lazily.

"You act mighty self-satisfied," accused Pearce. "F'r gosh sakes, don't hold out on me. I'm in bad at headquarters. Gimme a break!" His voice was almost pleading.

"Jake," promised the sheriff, "I'll cut you in on the killin' and I gotta hunch it's mighty close." And that was all the troubled Pearce could get out of him.

TOWARDS noon the sheriff stuck on his Stetson and drifted over to The Gold Eagle. A buckboard rattled past as he left the plankwalk, its whirling wheels smothering him with dust. Close behind it raced a livery pony, a sober clad gambler in the saddle, hands locked tight on the horn.

With puzzled eyes the sheriff stood back and surveyed the procession that swirled through the dust clouds—ponies, buckboards, sulkies, anything on wheels that a horse would pull, tearing out of town as though from the plague.

Finally, he dodged across Main Street. Bill North sat on a bench outside The Jewel Hotel, watching the parade with a complacent smile.

The sheriff plunked down beside him.

"Heard of rats leavin' a sinking ship," he grunted, "But fust time I've seen it."

North grinned. "You hit it, sheriff, the rats are streaming out of Dutch Springs. It's just about sunk as a construction town. In a month it will be as dead as last year's calendar."

"So they're hot-footing tuh stake out claims in Indian Flat!"

North nodded absently, absorbed by the stampede.

"But they'll find the claims are all pre-emptied by Bill North and Lerou."

The young fellow's head jerked round. "How did you guess that?"

"I rode up tuh the Flat."

"For Maggie!" ejaculated North. "Did you—" he stopped, embarrassed.

"Nope, some jigger tipped her off, name of North." Pat watched the young fellow's flushed features from beneath the brim of his Stetson. "Howcome?" he demanded curtly.

North shuffled his feet uneasily, staring moodily at the dust fog. "Well, I suppose I had better tell the whole story." His voice was reluctant. "It may sound fantastic, but it's true." He told the sheriff of his tip from Chicago, meeting Lerou in the stage, the saloon keeper's attempted double-cross, Maggie's warning and his night ride to outwit the hatchet-faced saloon man. "You see," he concluded, half-defiantly, "I owed it to the girl. I don't like her sort, but I couldn't do less."

"So now yore set to clean up?" mused the sheriff.

"Clean up!" North's voice pulsated with triumph. "Why, I bought land for twenty dollars an acre that I'll sell for a thousand."

"And it's worth mebbe a dollar," drawled Pat.

"As range land," returned North impatiently, "but not building sites."

"And you got it corralled?"

"Between us, Lerou and I have the whole country tied up. If they want to pitch a tent or build a saloon, they'll have to pay our price. Sheriff, I'm in the money!"

"You workin' in cahoots with Lerou?"

"We have a verbal agreement not to sell without consulting each other, to prevent these sharks from playing Lerou off against me," explained North.

Pat rose. "'Pears like you got it figgered out pat, but I never yet saw a balloon thet warn't liable tuh bust."

"When it bursts I'll be on Easy Street."

THE SHERIFF moved off along the plankwalk. He glanced through the carefully washed window of June's pie shop. Larsen's blue-eyed wife was standing behind the counter. She gestured imperatively.

Pat ducked through the low doorway, but not before he had noted a rider with a dishevelled shock of red hair hunkered against the front of a gambling joint across the street, apparently asleep.

"Maggie Maloney's in town!" announced June dramatically. "The shameless creature bought a pie, not ten minutes ago. She was dressed in a man's pants and blue shirt and wore a black sombrero."

"Any idea whar she hangs out?"

June's eyebrows lifted. "Should I? some man probably."

"H'm!" Pat leaned negligently on the counter, grey eyes on the girl's face. "Yuh don't cotton to Maggie, do yuh?"

June's slim shoulders raised. "With A dance-hall jade turned robber, a woman whose name is bandied around every saloon?"

"I guess not," agreed the sheriff slowly. He headed for the street. "Thanks f'r the tip!"

For two hours the sheriff hunched in a cow shed that lay within sight of the rear of The Bucket of Blood, and watched Lerou's back door through a gap in the sun-shrivelled plank wall. Flies buzzed around him in a tormenting swarm. The stench of manure lay heavy on the hot air and the fleas were thick. But at last Pat's patience was rewarded.

A slim black-hatted figure emerged, glanced quickly around, then strolled up the alley between the saloon and the dive next door.

Directly his quarry disappeared into the shadowed alley, the sheriff stepped out of hiding, ran across the intervening brushy flat and plunged into the alley. Maggie—if it were she—was emerging from the further end. She mingled with the crowd clumping along the plankwalk.

Pat kept the black Stetson in sight as she moved casually along. The press of men thinned and the sheriff dropped back as the girl approached edge of town. Wooden plankwalks gave place to a wide sandy wagon road, along each side of which bunched tents and shacks.

The black sombreroed figure cut off at an angle, threading through

the tents, opened the door of a small, tin-roofed shack and stepped inside.

Pat circled the shack, noted that there was no rear door and the windows were too small to permit exit. He knuckled the door.

Maggie's head, crowned with a billowing mass of hair, poked out. Her dark eyes focused on the expectant sheriff. There was more mockery than fear in them.

"Well, well! The law! Step right in, sheriff!"

Wary of a trap, Pat entered, eyes alert, and saw at a glance that Maggie was alone in the one-room cabin.

The place was neat and clean. At one end, a blanket, strung upon wire, partially screened a small iron bedstead. The bed was made up. Its rich silk bedspread struck an incongruous note in the rough clapboard cabin.

A dresser, over which was hung a large oval mirror; a small iron stove, together with a table and two chairs, completed the furnishings. The table was covered with a freshly starched white linen cloth and a bowl of artificial red roses stood in its center. Pots and pans hung from nails back of the stove and two shelves were laden with dishes and groceries. The wooden floor was swept clean.

Maggie dropped into a chair and motioned the sheriff to the other.

"Well, bring out the handcuffs!" Amusement lingered in her husky tones.

"Thought mebbe you'd go quiet." There was a twinkle in Pat's grey eyes.

"I thought that you'd snapped out of that pipe dream," returned Maggie caustically. "Do I look like a train robber?"

The sheriff's gaze ran over her high boots, dark pants and rough shirt. "Wal, you don't look like Maggie Maloney, queen of The Bucket of Blood."

"You couldn't hold me if you arrested me," taunted the girl. "The boys smashed your musty old jail last time, and they'll do it again."

He never cornered a fugitive who acted less like one, decided Pat. "You still use the same brand of scent?" he inquired irrelevantly.

"Never use any other. My friends tell me it's fascinating."

"Ma'am," said the sheriff, with frank admiration. "You don't need scent. Now lissen tuh me!"

THIRTY MINUTES later, the pair left the cabin and headed for the Courthouse. Maggie stepped briskly to keep pace with the sheriff's long stride.

Pat glanced through the window when they reached June's pie shop. Maggie smiled and called a greeting to the serene-faced owner. Powdered white, the perspiring Jose staggered into the store, shouldering a sack of flour.

In the little leanto office, Pat rasped his chin and gazed at his prisoner in perplexity. "I'd hold yuh at my place," he offered, "but Sally might misunderstand." His face creased in a grin as a thought struck him "Reckon we'll ride out tuh Sam's ranch. Gamble the little runt is driving his wife crazy—he's nursing a mess of hornet stings. The gal u'll welcome feminine company and I gotta keep yuh under cover f'r awhile."

That evening, Jake clumped into the sheriff's office.

"Just heard you corralled Maggie," he barked suppressed excitement in his deep voice. "She talk any?"

Pat shook his head. "Nary a word."

"Lemme see her!" blurted Pearce. "I'll make her sing! We jest gotta crack this case."

The sheriff leaned back in his chair, shook his head slowly. "I got her in a hideaway and she won't sing—not the tune you fancy."

"She will when I work on her," reiterated the detective doggedly.

"Nope!" Pat's voice was decided. "We been barkin' up the wrong tree, Jake. The scent was too strong f'r us—and I mean scent. Maggie Maloney was framed!"

CHAPTER XVIII

FOR ONCE in his life, the poker-faced Pearce registered surprise. The cigar drooped helplessly from his slackened jaw. He

stiffened, staring at the relaxed sheriff, slid low in the beloved swivel chair, with incredulous eyes.

Pat grinned.

"You—you haven't fallen for the gal?" stammered Pearce.

"Nope, Jake, I gotta wife I wouldn't trade f'r a dozen Maggies. Reckon I took the wrong road way back and I'm back-trailing fast."

"But the mask—the scent—Lerou—Blondy—the jail break—they all tie in!" Jake was obviously at a loss.

"They don't tie Maggie in!" There was a flat finality in the sheriff's voice that warned Pearce of the futility of argument. He switched to another line of attack. "Then why are you holding the gal if she's simon-pure?" he demanded.

Pat smiled indulgently, reached for the inevitable makin's. "Did yuh ever set out tuh trap a wolf? Wal, yuh gotta fool the lobo, set two traps—one whar he figgers you will and the other whar he never figgered at all. I'm huntin' for wolf right now and I gotta fool the critter." Pat paused and scrapped a stinker to ignite his smoke.

"Wal, where's the traps?"

"The first is up at the Circle L, three men, gunnin' for Larsen. The second, wal, no one knows but yours truly, and yours truly won't talk."

Pearce chewed his cigar with angry impotence. Spat out the shredded butt.

"See here, Pat!" he pleaded. "You know I'm in bad at headquarters. I gotta get action, see? The Chicago & Rio Grande pays Pinkerton to protect their payrolls. Our men have been working around here under cover ever since they spiked the first rail. We had two guys planted in the Yard and Rolly to keep an eye on the town. The Line never lost a payroll 'til Wizner was knocked off. On top of that the bustards lifted two more. Is my name mud? Worse! It stinks at headquarters. Rolly stops a slug. I hustle in two more men. What do they uncover? Nothing! Now you got the lowdown and you act coy! Gimme a break, pal!"

It was a stirring speech for the usually placid Pearce and it plainly came from his heart. But he didn't know Pat Stevens. Once he had decided upon a course of action, the sheriff could be as stubborn as a Missouri mule. Though he would never admit it, Pat was proud of the prestige he had built up in the stormy history of Powder Valley. It irked him that the railroad had so little confidence in his ability that they planted Pinkerton men in his bailiwick to protect their payrolls. Jake Pearce was on the up-and-up, he had to do his job, but he was an outsider and Pat couldn't forget his unconscious air of superiority when he first dropped into the office. However much Jake's feelings might be ruffled, the sheriff decided to finish the job on his own hook. Mebbe they'd have a little more respect for a simple Western sheriff if he cracked the case under their noses.

These thoughts ran through the sheriff's mind as he idly watched the smoke from his cigarette s aking into the smoky light of the bracketted lamp. "Sorry, Jake," he said aloud, "I ain't in a talking mood. It won't be long now afore the case busts wide open and I'll ring you in on the finish. Yuh kin take the credit, too, if it'll square yuh with headquarters. I got the wolf spotted but not the coin. Ef the critter gets a whig of our scent afore we spring the trap mebbe we'll never locate it."

"What if he gets wise and plugs you?" objected Pearce. "I'm in a jackpot!"

"You gotta take thet chance," said Pat gently.

LIPS SET in a tight line, the Pinkerton man jerked to his feet and stalked out. Pat's lips curved in a smile as he listened to the fast receding steps. He knew just how Jake felt, but this was one hand he was determined to play out.

The sandy soil outside crunched again and Ezra stuck his flaming mop around the doorpost. "Nels!" he grunted.

Pat jumped up, hastily buckled on his gunbelt and yanked on his hat. He stepped out into the gloom. Ezra led the way, walking in the shadow

of the Courthouse. At its further end, a few paces from the plankwalk, he stopped, pointed.

Main Street was darkened save where flares outside dives and dance halls spluttered amid yellow halos, and rectangles of light slanted out from saloon windows.

Across the street, a hundred paces higher up, was June's pie shop. A dim light glowed within, silhouetting three burros tied to the rail outside. Bending low beneath the weight, a tall Mexican in steeple-topped sombrero, was packing out a sack of flour. He dropped it across the kyacks of a burro, straightened with visible relief, and re-entered the shop.

"Thet's Nels!" growled Ezra.

"Le's go git him!" Pat's voice was taut. "You mosey along this side and cover him from up street. I'll brace him. Rattle yore hocks!"

Ezra faded into the obscurity of the canopied plankwalk. Pat mechanically checked the position of his gun butt, angled across the dim street towards the burros.

The plankwalks were thick with idling construction hands, drifting from saloon to saloon, but the street was clear.

Twenty paces from the animals the sheriff stopped. Nels Larsen re-appeared, toting another sack on his broad back. Bent low, he did not see the watching sheriff in the subdued light.

With a grunt, he dumped the sack across a burro. Pat's sharp challenge cut through the gloom— "Hist 'em, Nels!"

Quick as a panther, the long-sought bandit ducked and drew. Two guns thundered almost as one. Pat heard the hum of a speeding slug, thumbed and fired again.

As the echoes rolled along the street and the loungers packed on the plankwalk broke and ran all ways like a flock of panicked sheep, another gun spilled flame and thunder, on the bandit's further side.

Larsen whirled, flung a shot at the crimson flash, backed across the plankwalk, crouching. Pat inched forward, fired again. Ezra's gun spat steadily from the darkness, while the cornered Nels flung lead to right and left.

The rolling roar of gunfire filled the street and lances of flame licked through the powder haze. The hoarse shouts of excited spectators, the pounding of running feet, the crash of a store window as a shot went wild, fell unheeded upon the sheriff's ears. Every faculty was concentrated upon Larsen's hunched form.

Of a sudden the bandit jerked to full height, as though twitched by an invisible wire. Pat thumbed the hammer and loosed his fifth and last shell. Nels staggered, shook as though with a palsy, crashed down on the plankwalk.

Pat ducked under the rail. Beyond the sprawled figure he sighted Ezra's big form, easing along the store fronts with smoking iron.

Together, they reached the fallen man. Larsen's eyes were closed, his limbs slack. The gun had slipped from his relaxed hand.

PAT HOLSTERED his iron, bent and pulled open the bandit's shirt. "As full of holes as a colander!" There was wonder in the sheriff's voice, wonder at the man's vitality.

"Danged hard tuh kill!" grunted Ezra. "I gamble I never missed the jasper once—with the light behind him."

Pat rushed through the fast-growing throng that gathered around and entered the pie shop. The window was shattered and a slug had gouged a splintery furrow across the counter. June was rising off the floor.

"Dead?" Her face was bloodless.

The sheriff nodded.

"I warned him, but he would come!" she said stonily.

"Guess Nels didn't know what fear meant," returned Pat quietly. "Better that than a rope."

June stared voicelessly at the elbowing mob outside. At the hitch rail, the three burros still stood. "Perhaps," she asked tonelessly, "you'd have someone pack the flour in again."

"I'll take care of the flour," said Pat. "Now you get out back until we pack Nels outta here." He pushed

past the surge of onlookers, left Ezra to supervise removal of the dead man, slid across the back of one burro and led the two pack animals down the street.

An hour later the sheriff and Ezra lounged in the leanto, hashing over the fracas.

"Wal," chuckled the redhead, "I jest like tuh see Sam's map when he jears about this—we git the king-pin while he sets at home like an old hen. Teach the little runt tuh have more respect f'r hornets."

"Who claimed we got the king-pin?" Pat's face held the ghost of a grin.

"Ain't Nels—"

"Nope, the king-pin is a woman."

"A wimman!" gasped Ezra.

"Yep, and she's due tuh make a call."

As though she had been summoned, June Larsen, face hard and white as marble, entered the leanto. Questioning, her cold eyes scrutinized the sheriff.

"My flour?" she said briefly.

Pat smiled slowly. "Wal, ma'am, you ain't baking any more pies."

Her eyebrows went up. "No?"

"Not—in Dutch Springs."

"I don't know what you mean." Her clear tones were as brittle as glass, and as hard.

The sheriff's grey eyes met hers. "I'd hate tuh see a gal, born and bred on the range, spend the rest of her life plaiting hair bridles. I'll give yuh 'til sun-up to split the breeze. Good night, ma'am!"

June froze. She half-opened her mouth to speak, then clamped it shut like a steel trap. Abruptly, she swung upon her heel.

Ezra had taken in the brief exchange with drooping jaw, his one eye swiveling betwixt Pat's lean features and the girl's taut form with bewilderment in its depths. "Say," he burst out as June Larsen disappeared in the darkness. "Am I loco or are you? You ain't tellin' me thet gal had a hand in Wizner's killin'?"

"Nope."

"Or lootin' the payroll?"

"Not the first one."

"Dogblastit Pat, you got me tied up in knots," groaned the big redhead.

The sheriff rose and yawned. 'You go get some shuteye. We got a big day tomorrow. And dream about how you gonna spend the reward. We shore got plenty coming. 'Member the railroad's standing offer—one-fourth for recovery?"

"But we ain't recovered none,' protested Ezra.

Pat patted his puzzled pard on the shoulder. "Vamoose!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE AMAZING rumor swept through Dutch Springs like a prairie fire. A dozen garbled versions were repeated in the dives down Main Street. It reached the sheriff's ears as he sat on a stool in the Chink's behind a smoking stack of flapjacks—the line was abandoned!

An excited teamster relayed the news as he swallowed a cup of coffee. He'd pick it up in the Yard. Corroboration came from others. Soon the entire restaurant was buzzing with the news.

Pat, placidly packing away flapjacks, lost not a word. Deep inside he was conscious of a surge of joy—the impossible had occured, Powder Valley would be returned to the ranchers. Dives and dance halls would melt away. Once again cattle would be king. He checked his rising enthusiam. This was prbably no more than wild rumor, inspired by news that the construction camp was moving. He slid off the stool and pushed through the fly curtains.

Men were gathered in knots on the plankwalk. Already a pall seemed to have descended upon the dives as though they had heard their death knell. One saloon bore a large, hastily lettered sign, "FOR SALE—CHEAP."

The sheriff headed for the Yard. Stanton, the soldierly operator, was on duty in the telegraph shack.

"What's the lowdown on this yarn about quitting construction?" inquired Pat.

"It's right here!" Stanton fingered a wad of flimsies, extracted one and extended it towards his visitor.

Pat spread the yellow sheet on the plank counter. With quickening interest, he read:

G. McAllister
Chief Engineer
Dutch Springs.
Consolidation with C & R.G. rejected at special meeting of Overland stockholders. Directors have decided to abandon all trackage north of Eagle Creek, and proceed with original surveys. Stop all construction immediately and cancel local contracts. Further instructions will follow.

Walsh
Superintendent.

The sheriff whistled softly. "Say, that'll cost the Chicago and Rio Grande plenty."

"They got plenty!" grunted Stanton indifferently. "I gamble plenty jaspers lost their shirts at Indian Flat. Land's been skyrocketing up there. The camp was due to move on pronto."

The rumor hit Bill North with the impact of a forty-five caliber bullet as he descended the stairway of The Jewel Hotel. Jabbering men packed the lobby. Snatches of talk drifted to his ears—"Pulling out for keeps"—"Overland never would work with the C. & R.G."—"Crazy scheme anyways." His stomach shrank into an icy knot.

He pushed towards the desk, where Shackleteeth Simpson, the clerk, blinked behind steel-himmed spectacles.

"What's all the fuss about?" he demanded.

"Ain't yuh heard?" The old clerk's false teeth clicked like castanets. "The railroad's pulling out. No more steel in Powder Valley! The coyotes got it all back. Hurrah sez I!"

North stood motionless, faculties paralyzed as he grasped the extent of the calamity.

Shackleteeth forgot his excitement at the look of horror on the young man's face. He grabbed North's arm, shook it violently. "Hey, snap out of it, mister!"

NORTH turned away, walked like an automaton towards the street. Unseeingly, he stared ahead as he pushed his way through groups of chattering men. It was impossible, inconceivable! The Chicago & Rio Grande was scheduled to link up with the Overland. It had exended millions in construction. Plans were laid for the next jump forward to Indian Flat. There was a mistake somewhere, there must be a mistake, otherwise he was ruined. Every dollor he owned was tied up in land around Indian Flat—land that was worth a dollar an acre according to Pat Stevens, and he had paid twenty. The bubble had burst!

He drifted down to The Bucket of Blood, elbowed through the throng that clustered along the bar and ordered a bottle of redeye. The fiery liquor, instead of drowning his despair, intensified it. With lack-luster eyes he downed drink after drink. Yesterday, he thought bitterly, he was a millionaire—on paper. Today he was a pauper.

Sickened by the whisky on an empty stomach, he pushed the bottle away, leaned on the bar, head cradled upon his hands. The drone of conversation around beat upon his ears. Dully, he listened to the loud talk of those who jostled him on either side, then a remark burned upon his brain and jerked his head around. A sober-faced gambler was talking in a flat monotone: "You can't trump Lerou's ace, he's as slick as a new deck! He loaded up on Indian Flat lots and sold 'em all at fancy prices. I know—I bought one! He wouldn't deal until I promised not to record it for a month. How d'ye figure that one?"

"No one ever figured Lerou," chuckled another. "He—" But the words died on North's ears as he thrust away from the bar. So Lerou had double-crossed him, damn his crooked soul! The young ex-paymaster's strong hands clenched and

unclenched as a black rage possessed him. He'd tear that slimy buzzard to pieces, smash his hatchet face to a pulp.

Dark eyes smouldering, he searched the saloon, sighted Lerou's tall figure by the gambling tables. Swiftly, he strode across the sanded floor.

The saloon keeper was talking to Silky Selby. Seated, the still-faced gambler was idly ruffling a deck of cards.

At North's approach he hissed a warning. Lerou's small eyes flicked over the tall figure threading purposefully through the tables. His right hand slid beneath his black coat, but he greeted North with the usual stock smile.

"So we're cleaned out—busted!" barked the young fellow.

Lerou shrugged, "That's the way the cards fall!"

"For me, but not for you, you dirty double-crosser!" North's voice was strained with passion. He moved closer, fists bunched. "I'm going to smash you, Lerou!"

The saloon man's hand slipped out from beneath his coat. Light reflected upon the blue steel of a derringer. Before he could use it, North's right fists pistoned into his stomach. With a grunt, Lerou doubled like a folded ruler—to stop an uppercut that snapped his head back and glazed his eyes. North leaped forward like a tiger to slash the swaying form... something crashed against his ear, Lerou dissolved into a myriad pinpoints of dancing light and then darkness enveloped his numbed senses. He did not see Silky sliding his clubbed gun back into its shoulder holster, or the angry-eyed young woman who flung herself like a wildcat upon the startled gambler.

NORTH returned to consciousness with a groan. His head felt like a seething cauldron of lead. He fingered it gingerly—and encountered wet cloths. Hazily, he stared around. He was lying on a yellow bed, screened by a hanging blanket. Brow wrinkled, he strove to recall events. Fuzzily, he remembered drinking in The Bucket of Blood, hitting Lerou, then oblivion. Where was he now? This was no hotel room.

A slim white hand pulled the curtain aside and Maggie Maloney appeared with a basin of water. North frowned at her in bewilderment. "What happened? Where am I?" he croaked.

"Silky conked you in The Bucket of Blood," returned Maggie in a matter-of-fact voice, "and you're in my cabin. Now make a scandal out of that! I got back from Sam's place just in time, seems to me."

She deftly unwrapped the towel from his head, wrung out another and laid it upon his throbbing forehead.

"You'll soon be as fit as a fiddle," she assured him cheerfully. "Silky knows just how hard to conk a guy. He should, the snake, he's had plenty practice."

North eyes followed her as she bustled around the bed. "Say!" he said slowly, "I just can't figure you out."

Maggie smiled and patted the pillow to better support his head. "Don't try, get some sleep!"

"Lerou tricked me."

"He'd double-cross his own mother."

"You heard about the railroad? I've lost every dollar."

She stood above him, dark eyes soft as she read the despair stamped upon his features.

"You'll make plenty more, big boy," she assured him lightly. "Now get some sleep!" She pulled the blanket back into place and left him.

The cabin was in semi-darkness when North again awoke. His head pounded like a hammer when he rolled off the bed, and he staggered slightly as he moved to the window, but he could think coherently. It was growing dark outside. Maggie Maloney had disappeared.

He stuffed his pipe, settled into a chair, thinking—and his thoughts were not of Lerou, or his blasted hopes, or even of the bewildering Maggie, but of a fat, middle-aged Lothario, belly bulging over his belt, staring into the black muzzle of a gun. Finally, North's worried brow

cleared, his decision made. He rose, knocked the dottle out of his pipe and gently eased on his Stetson.

Still shaky, but stepping out with more assurance every minute as he inhaled the cooling breeze that soughed down from the Culebras, North headed for the glare of Main Street. Now that the first searing shock of his misfortune had passed, a feeling of calmness possessed him. "You'll make plenty more," Maggie had said. Little did she know! Gambler's gold! It came easy and melted fast. It was greasy gold. Slipped through a fellow's fingers like quicksilver. Well, he was through with it. His thoughts flew to Maggie. There was a world of understanding in those deep, dark eyes. She was like a gorgeous rose, warm, glowing with life. June had beauty, too, but glazed with ice.

He left the friendly darkness, hit the plankwalks and drifted along beneath the lights, watching the motley crowd of men spend their last dollars in Dutch Springs' vanishing dives.

A finger tapped the ex-paymaster's shoulder and a lazy voice drawled, "I been looking f'r you!"

North turned. At sight of the sheriff, he smiled wryly. "I was looking for you, too. I have a confession to make."

"Murder?"

North nodded, with a tired smile. Gosh, if only his head would quit throbbing. He swayed back and forth. Pat grabbed his arm, steered him towards the Courthouse.

The two faced each other in the little leanto—the sheriff swung around in his swivel chair; North, big frame slumped in a straightback chair, hopeless resignation in his eyes.

"Wet yore whistle!" Pat fished out a bottle from a desk drawer and pulled the cork with his teeth.

NORTH stretched out his hand gratefully, drank deeply and passed the bottle back. The liquor brought life into his eyes.

"How did you know?" He spoke as indifferently as if he were discussing the weather.

"Jest plain hoss-sense. Wizner bolted hisself in the armored car with the payroll. He opened up, sat down behind his desk and never drawed his gun. Thet meant he recognized the feller he let in and was mighty sure it was a friend. Who would he open up to, with a safe full of gold, except Glencourt or you? Glencourt was in town, you were alone. But you stuck yore own neck in the noose. 'Member the morning after he was killed. I routed you out and told you he was plugged? I didn't say killed. You come right back, 'So Wizner's dead!' You KNEW! Then I checked up on this." The sheriff pulled a creased yellow sheet from a desk drawer. North glanced at it indifferently:

IDENTITY ESTABLISHED. CHANGED NAME BEFORE PROCEEDING TO CHILE. FULL REPORT FOLLOWS BY MAIL.

ACME.

"You claimed it was about yore brother. Acme proved you a liar. You'd been checking on Wizner. His name was Langworthy—once. He changed it to Wizner, hit for Chile, came back later, signed up with the Chicago & Rio Grande. They gave you a full report. I dunno why, nor do they. But you knew him afore you come to Dutch Springs, and my guess is thet you came to croak him—mebbe you kin tell me why."

Pat paused, built a smoke, his grey eyes focussed on North. The young fellow pulled out his pipe, stuffed the bowl. "Couldn't figger the motive, an' the other payroll hijackin' following right after," continued the sheriff, "kinda threw me off the trail f'r awhile. A feller like you don't kill f'r fun, and the coin never came to light—'till yuh loaded it at Indian Flat. I calculated tuh give you enough rope tuh hang yoreself—and you did!"

"And lost every dollar!" interjected North.

Pat rattled the jail keys. 'Wal, I

reckon thet's all unless yuh want tuh talk."

"It was my intention to make a clean breast of the whole affair," erturned North calmly. "My hands are not altogether red; I dealt justice even if it looks like murder. Wizner was my father." He paused. "I'm his illegitimate son. He lured my mother from her home and then left her alone in New York. She was too proud to appeal to her family and had to earn a living by waiting in Bowery restaurants, washing dishes and sweeping floors." His voice faltered, recovered. "Her health failed, but until the day she died she worked body and soul together decently. I was only a child, but I understood her struggle. I swore then that I'd get the man who dragged her down. Well, I got him, but it was a long, long chase. Stealing the payroll was an afterthought. I thought it would hide the motive. I buried it beneath the car, but I forgot the gun. I guess I became panicky, because I dropped the spent shell in the ashes of the stove and then pitched the gun in the brush outside. That nearly tripped me up. Remember the Pinkerton detective?" He smiled crookedly. "They say there's never a perfect crime!"

Silence lay heavy in the little leanto as North finished. Pat studied him without speaking.

Restless beneath the scrutiny, the young fellow jerked nervously to his feet. "Well, I'm ready—ready to hang, with a smile."

Pat motioned towards the door. "Vamoose!" he drawled.

North stood stock-still, staring at the lean-faced sheriff in amazement.

"I—don't—understand," he stammered.

"Git!" grunted Pat, "Wizner had it coming. I'd call it justifiable homicide. Ferget Wizner—I have."

CHAPTER XX

TWO OPEN sacks of flour sagged against the back wall of the sheriff's office. Right arm powdered white to the elbow, Pat sat in his swivel chair and regarded them beningnantly.

A heavy step shook the floor and Jake Pearce's solid form blocked the doorway. "You sent for me?" he inquired gruffly.

"Shore!" Pat waved to a chair. "Rest yore laigs!"

"Rest!" grated the Pinkerton man. "How can I rest with Chicago on my neck?"

"They still squawking about the coin?"

"What else?"

"Wal, they kin quit, it's done recovered."

Pearce moved close, sniffed suspiciously. "Can't smell liquor, so I reckon you arn't drunk. Mebbe you got a touch of sun?"

Pat chuckled, nodded towards the flour sacks. "There's yore coin!"

First the Pinkerton man stared at the whitened sacks, then at the lounging sheriff. He noticed the flour smudge on Pat's arm, stepped abruptly across the office, plunged his hand into the nearer sack. Amazement slowly registered upon his ruddy features as he groped. He yanked out a bulging leather pouch. The coin within clinked as he fingered it.

"Well — I'll — be — damned!" he breathed, staring at the whitened money bag as though in a trance. Then Jake came to life, dropped the pouch on the floor, plunged both arms into the sack. Flour flew in a choking cloud about his head and shoulders as he pulled out pouch after pouch, dropping them indiscriminately on the floor and frenziedly fishing for more.

Finally, he desisted and turned to face the grinning sheriff. His dark suit was smothered with clinging flour; his face and Stetson were white; all around his feet, on the floury floor, lay Chicago & Rio Grande bullion. His eyes shone.

"Say!" he spluttered. "How in hell—"

"Set down!" said Pat. "You look like you need a bracer." He produced the bottle. Pearce took a long pull, breathed deeply, stuck a cigar between his teeth and lit up.

"F'r gosh sakes spill the yawn," he begged. "You got me groggy."

The sheriff stared reflectively at the whitened money bags. "Ain't much to it," he confessed. "Shoulda wised up before, but I hit the wrong trail. I had Lerou pegged as the kingpin, with Maggie taking a hand. Figgered the gal was crazy f'r a thrill. 'Member the mask Ezra picked up after the Coyote Cut smash? Thet side-tracked me. It carried Maggie's scent and she swore no other gal could get it. Wal, you picked up a wipe in the Express car after the last hold-up, soaked in scent. I picked up another in the Circle L ranch house. They all stank of Odor d'Amour.

"Thet set me thinking—either Maggie was doggoned determined tuh tell the world she was lootin' railroad payrolls or someone was hell-bent tuh frame her.

"Then I got a break. After the Coyote Cut affair I rode up to the Circle L with June Larsen. She dropped a hairpin, wimmen shed 'em everywhere they go." He pulled a small amber-colored hairpin out of his vest pocket. Pearce examined it intently. "Thet's the pin! And here's its twin!" The sheriff produced another pin, identical with the other. "Thet's the pin from the Express car!"

From another pocket the sheriff rustled more hairpins, long and slender. "I gathered these from the carpet in Maggie's hotel room at Indian Flat. Get it?"

PEARCE nodded, listening with absorbed interest as the sheriff went on.

"So the finger pointed at June Larsen. But it jest didn't seem possible. Then I began tuh think back. June loosed a shot when we was riding up to the Circle L, after the Coyote Cut smash. She fired at a squirrel—for fun she said. But it mighta been tuh warn Nels. Then she split the breeze at noon, when she found I was hunting f'r the payroll cache. Right after, the gang jumped me."

Pat paused, tilted the bottle and cleared his throat.

"Wal, even then I was scared of tangling my rope. Maggie swore no other gal in Dutch Springs could get her scent. Then I tapped the pie shop. Busted in when June was outta town. Thet cinched it! The danged blonde had a half-empty bottle of Odor d'Amour stowed away and her hairpins matched the two in yore paw."

"But I wanted the loot. It shore was cached somewheres. Ef I put the finger on June she'd dumb up and Nels would high-tail. So I played possum. I put Maggie wise and corralled her, for a bit, jest to make June feel good. Then I set Ezra tuh watch the pie shop. He lamps Nels packing out sacks of flour. Now whyinnell would Nels pack flour? The answer hit me right there as we blasted Nels—the gold was in the flour sacks. I recollected that after each hold-up, Jose brought in a load of flour f'r June.

"I give June a chance tuh light a shuck—and she took it. Ezra tipped Jose and I gamble the greaser's over the Border by now. Wal, I reckon thet's al!" Pat rolled a smoke.

Pearce ran a hand over his floury chin. "No arrests!" he murmured doubtfully.

"You got plenty gold, ain't thet enough? Lay it all on Nels, he ain't hear to argue."

The Pinkerton man nodded. "It's yore case, Pat. I been trailing way behind."

"Like hell!" came back the sheriff emphatically. "We're in this fifty-fifty. They's reward money aplenty tuh split."

Pearce rose, coughed with embarrassment and extended his hand. "You're a man, Stevens, and a damsight better detective than ever toted a Pinkerton badge."

"Fergit it!" snorted Pat. "Heah! Kill the bottle!"

Toting his valise, Bill North issued from The Jewel Hotel. On the plankwalk outside he hesitated, gazing indecisively up and down the street. Already the spirit of carnival had died in Dutch Springs. Tents were coming down, barkers were silent. From the Yard came the shrill whistle of engines hauling flatcars of laborers southward.

Like a magnet, Maggie's cabin drew the young ex-paymaster. Swinging his valise, he hoofed down Main Street.

Outside the little shack, he dropped his bag and hesitantly knuckled the door. It opened, and Maggie stood before him.

"Hello!" she cried. "How's the landowner?"

"Feeling lower than a snake's belly," he answered ruefully.

"Stop croaking and come in!" He stepped inside and Maggie closed the door.

North stood by the table, shuffling uncomfortably.

Maggie pushed a chair forward. "No charge for a seat!"

He gulped, suddenly reached forward, dropped his hands on the girl's shoulders. "Listen Maggie!" His voice was hoarse. "I'm down and out. I've got nothing, not even a reputation. But I'm a doggone good mining engineer and I can make good in South America. Will you—" he swallowed hard. "Will you—marry me?"

"Sure!" Her husky voice was soft, her dark eyes radiant as she met his pleading gaze. "You can kiss me! I won't slap you this time!"

After awhile, Maggie slipped out of his embrace. "Gosh!" she breathed. "What a bear! Well, when do we head for South America?"

"Just as soon as I earn the price of a passage."

Maggie's lips curved in her impudent grin. She crossed to the stove, lifted the lid and tugged out a sooty canvas sack. "Why work? Here's dinero aplenty!"

North hefted the sack. "Say!" he expostulated, "I can't use your coin, honey!"

"Arguing, before were even married!" accused Maggie, with a smile. "That's not my money, sweetheart, it's Lerou's proceeds from the sale of his land in Indian Flat—the dirty double-crosser!"

In silence, North stepped up to the stove and thrust the sack inside. "Let's go!" he said curtly.

"But—" began Maggie, wonder in her eyes.

"It's gamblers' gold. It carried a curse. Let's start with clean hands, sweet!"

Maggie's cheeks dimpled, and she threw out her arms to him.

THE END

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RAVAGED RANGE

by Peter Field

Appears in the Next Issue of the

WESTERN ACTION

Giff Blandon Suspected That Someone in the Wagon Trail Was in Cahoots With the Blackfeet Who Dogged Their Footsteps. But, He Might Be Wrong—Donovan Might Simply, Very Honestly Believe That Believe That Turning Back Was the Sensible Course.

CONESTOGAS FOR CHOTEAU

By Lee Floren

THE night had shown a million stars and moonlight had been clear across this rolling prairie of sage and greasewood, yet each shadow had held a threat seemingly out of accord with the apparent peacefulness of the night. The evening before, Trail Boss Cliff Blandon had made his muleskinners pull their twenty odd wagons into a tight circle on an alkali flat, wagon tongues lashed to tail-gates. While the mules had sought forage in the bleak area men had lain beneath the Conestogas, rifles beside them as they dozed.

Blandon had spent the night beyond the wagon, working with his guards, catching the raw significance of this danger. Yet the essence of it was simplicity itself: the Blackfeet under Running Cloud were on the move and his wagons carried rifles and ammunition and some supplies—grub mostly—for Fort Choteau, sixty miles to the west below the snow-covered rim of the Rockies. And Running Cloud needed these guns and this ball and powder.

With weariness deep into his bones, Blandon rode out of the dawn, a powerful man in his late twenties. A fringed buckskin jacket, its fine leather tanned by the chewing jaws of a Cheyenne squaw, draped itself across his wide shoulders. He wore California pants and short half-boots with Taos rowels in the Mexican, hand-hammered spurs. His hat was a flat, stiff-brimmed Stetson and the jaw-strap was joined together under his unshaven chin by a small silver skull, a trophy from a freighter trip

out of El Centro to Ensenada.

His mouth was a little tight now, the lines pulled back, and his eyes held a hardness added to that given them by over fourteen years of freighting through Indian country. A man saw him coming and dropped a tongue down and Blandon rode the mule through the breach and dismounted.

The man was slender, thin-faced. He wore greasy buckskins and Araho moccasins. He looked sharply at Blandon.

"Smith is dead." Blandon said quietly. "I found his body in a coulee about a hundred yards away. I buried him there under a ledge of soft dirt."

The slim man drew his hands into fists. "I heard no firing. I've bin awake all night Was it a knife?" Donovan asked the question for a purpose.

"A Blackfoot."

Men were moving under tarps and the camp was showing life.

Donovan asked,"We turn back to Benton, Blandon?"

Blandon shook his head.

Donovan's eyes were dull, without life. "Runnin' Cloud is movin'. He's goin' against anythin' that gets in his trail—be it white man or Sioux or Gros Ventre. He needs guns an' balls an' grub. We got all three."

The trail-boss dropped the mule's reins. "You mention turnin' back again an' I'll beat your damn' head off, Donovan. You try to turn my crew against me any more an' I'll kill you!"

Donovan moved back against a wagon, his right hand on the big Colts in his belt. Wind ruffled the dull-colored cavas of a freight-wagon and this sounded loud in the short silence.

Donovan said, "Hol' your temper, Wagon Boss."

"You miss one point. How would Runnin' Cloud know we carried rifles?" When we loaded off that sidewheeler on the Benton dock nobody but me knew these boxes held rifles. You pried into one on the trail an' passed word aroun' we were frightin' ca' tridges an' guns."

"Not me," Donovan stated ugly. "Don't accuse me of pilferin,' Blandon." His eyes were chiseled granite. "Sides that, if Running Clouds hits, he'll hit for what this train has. He's desperate. He'll figure we tote grub an' he needs full bellies for his braves. The buffalo are gone."

DONOVAN WAS right. They would be in danger if they'd freighted in with empty wagons. Blandon got to his flat-horned Mexican saddle and rode to a wagon, where he pounded on the canvas with his palm.

"Time to put out the chuck, cookie."

A voice inside told him the cook would be right out. He rode to another wagon and pounded again. A woman's voice said, "Who's there?"

"The wagon boss. Time to get up, Miss O'Brien."

"Get t'hell out of here!" the woman said sharply.

Blandon allowed a smile to break his solemn young face. He thought, "A woman—a young, good-lookin' woman—with a wagon train of rifles an' a buck behin' each sagebrush—" He cursed the big boss down in Great Falls. He'd given him a ringy, ornery crew of skinners and busted down-wagons and spavined mules, and on top of these he'd stood on the dock at Fort Benton and talked to a red-headed girl of twenty who had just come up from St. Louis with her red-headed kid brother.

"Blandon," the boss's said.

Blandon had come over from loading a wagon.

"Miss O'Brien is a daughter of Major William O'Brien, at Fort Choteau. She doesn't want to make the long trip by stage to Great Falls and then double back to the Fort. She and her brother want to cut across country with your wagons."

No stage ran direct from Fort Benton to Fort Choteau.

"No," Blandon had said.

Big Jim Jerkins' heavy jowls had shown a sudden redness. "Why not?" he challenged.

"The Blackfeet, for one."

Big Jim had growled like an hungry bulldog. "Blackfeet could hit the

stage, too. Your excuse isn't valid, sir. What's the other reasons?"

Blandon had been looking at the girl Now she put her level green eyes on his, and he found himself liking the rim of freckles that ran across her nose. He looked at twelve-year-old Hank O'Brien. The kid had caught a bullfrog down along the water edge and he was admiring the big frog without paying much attention to the conversation. Blandon had looked back at the girl.

"You're the boss, Big Jim."

That was the way it had come about. Big Jim Jerkins had wanted to get in the good with Major O'Brien, so he had saddled Giff Blandon with the responsibility of taking the major's daughter and son across a hundred and forty miles of Blackfeet territory. Big Jim had wanted other army contracts and he was playing favorites, and Giff Blandon was holding the sack.

One girl, with some forty odd men. Muleskinners and cut-throats, a few of them, and other gentlemen, despite their beards and rough talk Giff Blandon had wondered which would give him the more trouble: the Blackfeet or the woman. Now, as he rode his mule across the small clearing to the cook's fire, he grinned at Millie O'Brien's sassy reply.

He had brought a lot of that about. He's almost ignored her and he'd made things as rough as possible for her. They were six whole days out of Fort Benton and by this time should have been inside the stockade at Fort Choteau. But the fort was still sixty miles away.

Two days out of the river port a freak spring thunderstorm had hit them. Rain had driven them off the regular trail, low along the Marias river, and they had taken to the hills.... too late. Wagons had dropped tail had bogged to their high hubs in the river silt and mud.

They had cut down cottonwoods, tied them to the bottom of the wheels, and floated their Conestogas out of the muddy mire. Now the skinners were restless and quarrelsome; mules were already weary and plodding. In Fort Benton there had been much talk of Running Cloud, but the wagons had had to get through to Fort Choteau. Yesterday a buffalo hunter had told them Running Cloud had jumped the Browning Agency Reservation limits and was on the move south.

"They jumped their feedin' groun's like a buffaler'll leave short salt grass. No buffalo left an' the bellies on them bucks is flat against their backbones. I'm driftin' out, Wagon Boss."

"Where was the war-party seen last?"

"South fork of the Milk River. You ever freight in Montana before, fella?"

How the old man guessed this was Giff Blandon's first freight-trip in Montana, Blandon was never to know. But actually, he had never freighted north of Colorado before.

Prior to this trip, he'd done all his work in Colorado and the Southwest, working out of Independence, Missouri. He'd bucked Apaches and Seminoles and he yet had his first bead to draw on a Montana redskin.

He got down and hunkered, and Hank O'Brien came and squatted beside him. Blandon found himself smiling with a slowness. To the boy, he must have been a god; since they'd left Fort Benton, the boy had aped every gesture of his—he'd even taken to riding like Blandon rode, resting his saddle with his weight mostly on one stirrup.

"Sis is slow gettin' dressed, Giff."

Blandon nodded. "All women are slow, so they tell me." He got the iron platter with the hotcakes steaming on it and speared two and gave the platter to Hank. Greasy bacon came along and they got this and hot coffee. By this time, Millie O'Brien had washed in the creek beyond the rim of the wagons. She looked at Blandon with a calm, level look. "Good morning."

Blandon said, "That isn't what you told me when I pounded on your wagon."

"I'm a hellion in the morning."

Blandon wanted to say, "And most all the other time, too." Then he

thought, "I've treated her pretty rough; maybe that's why she is so ornery."

Men were coming in from guard; others going out. They sat cross-legged under wagons and ate with a slowness pushed on them by circumstance. Blandon noticed that they were not joshing or joking and that sign was bad in a crew.

Hank O'Brien said, "Heard tell Smith got his, an' you buried him."

"Who told you that?"

"Donovan."

Blandon looked at Donovan, seated twenty feet away with five men around him, but the men were talking, and Donovan did not see Blandon's anger. Blandon looked at the girl and for once her eyes showed something he recognized as fear.

"Smith, got killed?"

Blandon shook his head and inwardly cursed Donovan as a loose-tongued fool. "Maybe I shouldn't have told him," he thought, "but I figured he'd keep his tongue to himself." He said, "Smith went to the fort for help."

"Is it that dangerous?"

Blandon got to his feet. "I told you that on the dock at Fort Benton," he reminded.

She looked hard at him for a long second, then looked down at her coffee. Blandon went to where Donovan and the men talked. He squatted and they stopped talking, and the wagon-boss picked his teeth with a spear of bluejoint that had been overlooked by the mules.

He said, "Go ahead, talk. Don't quit just because I came over." He was watching Donovan, and watching them.

One man said, "We move, Blandon?"

Blandon nodded, toothpick in his teeth. "Not back toward Benton, though. We go ahead, toward the Fort."

Donovan got to his feet. Blandon was standing now, too. Donovan said, "We'll never run it, Blandon. Runnin' Cloud will be between us an' the Fort. We got a chance if we abandon our wagons an' head back on mule for Fort Benton, all in one bunch."

Blandon hit him twice. Donovan flung up his arms and Blandon hit him again and dropped him. Hank O'Brien came on the run and men looked up from eating. Donovan lay on the alkali, looking up at him with hate written across his loose lips.

Blandon said, "We're not droppin tail, fella. Bet your last Canuck dollar on that; we're not runnin' off!"

Donovan was silent, and more dangerous because of that.

Millie O'Brien said, "Please, don't fight!"

Cliff Blandon stepped back. "I ought to run you out of camp, Donovan. And by God, I would, if it wasn't makin' you commit suicide."

They all knew what he meant, and their faces showed it. A man alone could never make it to Fort Benton or over to Fort Choteau. He could never run that Blackfeet blockade and come out alive.

Blandon went back to his mule. He tightened the latigo. A powerful man, short-legged and rolling as he walked, came over. He said, "Blandon, I can run it! We got to get cavalry from Fort Choteau."

Hank O'Brien was listening, freckles shining. "Go away," ordered Giff Blandon.

"I'm in on this," the kid said stoutly. "My throat might get cut, too."

Blandon had to smile despite the gravity of the situation. He returned his attention to Ed Hodgson. "Smith never made it," he remended.

Hodgson said, "We move today an' then tonight I'll try."

Blandon nodded. Mules were being led up and harnessed and the rattle of tug-chains was sharp in the thin air. The wind had come up and taken on a howl as it swept through canvas and hummed off wagon-hubs. it was sharp, too.

THEY SWUNG the wagons out in a line, heading due west. Blandon held his mule and looked them

over, marking the gauntness of the mules, the sullenness of the drivers. He turned north and from a ridge looked at his guards, moving on each side of the wagons, a half-a-mile or so out.

A rider came from behind him. Freckles grouped around Hank O'Brien's pug nose as he scowled, and they reminded him of Millie's freckles.

"I told you not to follow me."

But the boy, if he heard, did not show it. "Hodgson might make it," he said. "He might, at that."

"You hear too much, an' you see too much. Now keep this between you an' me an' Ed Hodgson."

"Did I say I'd tell?"

Blandon said, "You've got your sister's spunk." There was a chasm between himself and the girl, and each mile of the trail had made it more significance. She had education and breeding; he'd just grown up naturally, dodging from place to place, working from the time he could remember. Here on the trail it did not show but when they reached the Fort it would widen. She was a major's daughter, and she moved in those circles, and no wagon-boss was invited there.

Hank rubbed his jaw, one of Blandon's gestures. "Sis is o'nery, Mr. Blandon, but I've never seen her so o'nery as she is now. You tease her, don't you?"

Blandon's face was serious by effort. "There's danger out there, Hank. Maybe it's rubbin' against all of us."

"Hodgson might get word to dad," the boy said.

They moved into the wind, men braced against it on their high seats, boots on the dashboards and rifles beside them. They were south of the beaten trail, for Giff Blandon knew that Running Cloud would be watching it, and they made their own trail. Therefore there was no dust and if there had been the wind would have whipped it away. They stopped for a brief rest at noon to eat and grain their stock, and when dusk came the rain was pelting down.

Blandon had seen Indian sign, and

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this was with him as the rain pounded across the sod. Before the rain he had seen a thin column of gray smoke dissolving into the blue of the sky, and this had been on a rocky butte to the north. He'd cut the sign of a lone horse back there in a draw, and he'd watched the brush and guessed at the danger it held.

They covered some twenty miles that day, and would have made around thirty had not the storm hit them. Rain dripped from canvas and wagons slipped and lurched, and mules pulled in dogged weariness. They swung in a circle and tied tongues to end-gates, and Blandon put out his guards.

Donovan came over and settled beside Blandon's small fire under a ledge. "Two more days, and we go into the Fort?"

"Two days, with this weather."

Donovan settled down. He said, "We've got luck against us, Blandon." He stirred the fire with a bent twig. "I want to tell you I'm sorry for talkin' out of turn."

Blandon hid his surprise. Apology certainly would not have been a part of this man's makeup, he'd figured. "Forget it friend." He went out into the rain. The fire back under the ledge could not be seen, for rocks hid it. There was nothing to mark their spot here unless Blackfeet scouts had found it that afternoon. And he felt sure they had.

Millie O'Brien spoke from the flap of her wagon. Blandon took the mule close. She said, "This rain is no help for us, is it?"

"No, it isn't."

Blandon wondered if she were lonesome and wanted to talk. Well, she could gab when she got to the Fort, if she got there. He said, "Watch Hank an' don't let him follow me."

"I will."

BLANDON rode back to the fire and Donavon was gone. he looked at the man's wagon, canvas rocking under the wind and rain, and then rode out through the breach the guard made by letting a wagon-

(Continued On Page 96)

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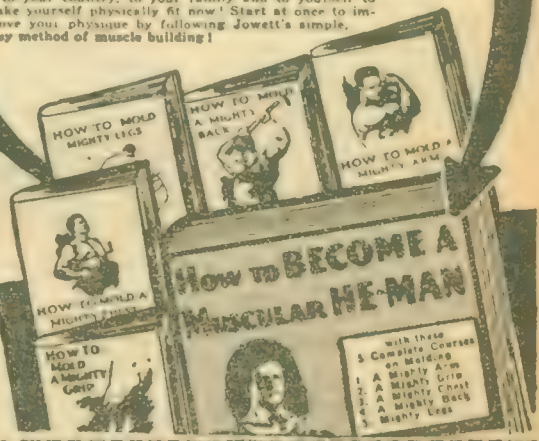

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WESTERN ACTION

(Continued From Page 94)

tongue drop. Hodgson had outlined his route carefully, for he knew this country well, and Blandon found his body around msdnight. He was dead and cold, and wet, and he had a knife in his back. Blandon squatted and slow terror. Only the Blackfeet left a pulled the knife out and jugled it in terror. Only the Blackfeet left a knife in a man after they'd killed him.

The fear of cold steel was on him, but finally it passed. He had heard of the legend in Fort Benton. They left the knife in you because, when the spirit of the dead man went to the Shadow Grounds, the knife would be identified by the Manitou, and He would mark up a good point in the record of the killer. Without the knife the Great Spirit would not be able to know who had killed the man.

Blandon got the stocky man in his grip and got him across his mule. He had the knife in his belt and he rode through the guards, calling for identification, and he put Hodgson in a wagon, covering him with a tarp as he lay on top of the cases of rifles.

Hank O'Brien crawled into the wagon. "I saw you ride in," the boy said. "So he didn't make it, huh?"

Blandon thought, "Death means nothing to you because you're young and got a whole life ahead, and death is a long ways from you in years." He said, "Damn it, kid, get to bed."

"And get my hair lifted? No!"

"You've read too many Buffalo Bill stories," growled Blandon. They went outside and he shook the boy by the shoulder. "Now get to bed, or I'll whip you. You may be a major's son but I'm the boss of this wagon train."

The boy tried to kick him but Blandon shoved him. The boy fell down in the mud and cursed him with words he had picked up from the 'skinners. Blandon got the mule and rode out again and spent the rest of the stormy night with his guards. The rain rolled across hills and flats and the darkness hid whatever moved out there. He knew why didn't they hit, and get it over with?

"But a redskin is that way," he thought. "They wait and when they're

(Continued On Page 98)

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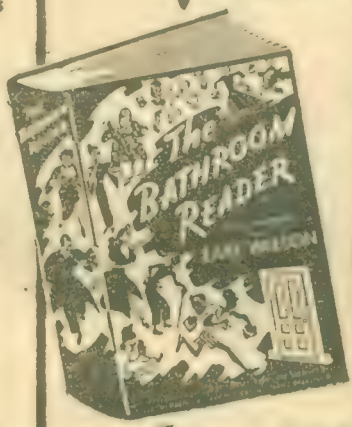

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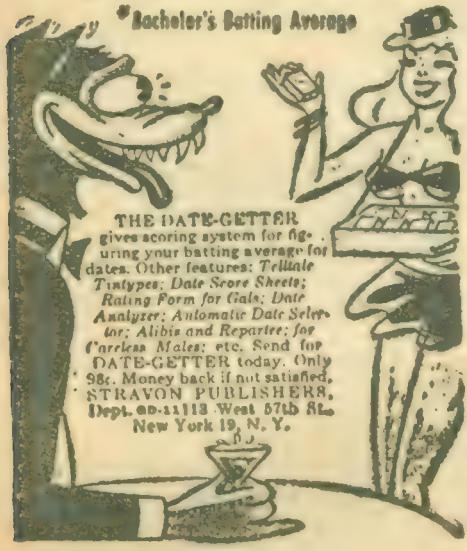

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(Continued From Page 96)

ready, they'll hit and hit hard. Two more days—one more night—and we'll make the Fort. It's got to be tonight or tomorrow night or never."

Dawn found a bit of clear sky, but a few minutes later clouds rolled across it, and the wind broke loose again. The cook had hot coffee and they ate cold jerky. Millie's hands were blue with cold against her coffee cup and Blandon looked at her with a slow smile.

"Smile, damn you," she exploded suddenly.

Blandon said, "You got me wrong. I was smiling at your courage, I guess, instead of at your predicament."

There were thinking of Hodgson, and he was dead under a trap. They got mules hooked up and against collars and mud rolled with the rims, building up and falling off. It was plod, plod, plod, and it was hang onto that rifle, keep your eyes on that skyline, keep searching the rain. Blandon left Donovan in charge of the wagons, and the man had a long, surprised glance.

Then he rode the lead and the outer edges, cursing the rain and the day and the circumstances. He damned the home office in Great Falls, damned them as they sat in their swivel chairs and watched the rain drip from the eaves. They were warm and in good spirits and Big Jim had shoved a girl and her brother off on him, and Big Jim had known of Running Cloud. Damn his ignorant soul!

WHEN NOON came, the rain had broken a little. He rode back to where men lay under traps, nursing hot coffee; he rode up and down the line, looking at the mules. They were munching oats with nosebags. He drew up to the last wagon and a grizzled man said, "We're feedin' heavy, Giff, but we'll have enough for another day."

"Grain them all they can stand, Joe."

He rode back down the line, his black slicker dark in the dim light.

Millie O'Brien called from the flap, "Mr. Blandon where's Hank?"

Blandon stopped his mules. He said, "Why ask me, miss?"

"He followed you, I think, when you rode out to the guards."

Blandon looked into the rain to hide his face and his thoughts. He said, almost too slowly, "I never saw him." His eyes showed his misery and she must have seen it, for she was suddenly soft.

Blandon rode up and down the line, asking about the boy. None of the skinners had him in his wagon and then Blandon rode out and found the guards. None of them had seen the kid, either.

Giff Blandon cursed with a display of emotion he seldom showed. He caught himself and sat his wet saddle, tracing back conversations and wondering if they held a clue as to the boy's actions. He rode back to the wagons that were finally moving west again, and he shook his head again and again to the questions of the 'skinners. He got to the girl's wagon and tied his mule to the tailgate and climbed inside the canvas.

He stood on his knees, braced against the rifle-cases, the wagon lurching. Millie lay under some blankets to keep warm and her face was hard to see in the darkness. Blandon asked, "What did he take with him?"

"His rifle and some pemmican and some cartridges."

"He had a .22, didn't he?"

"Yes, I think it was that."

Blandon looked at her for some time. Then he said, "He's gone for help. He's tried to break through."

She was silent.

He asked, "You don't cry, Millie?"

"Blandon, my dad is a soldier. All my life—and Hank's life—we've lived in outposts, and—Well, I guess it's training."

Blandon went outside into the wind. He backtracked, but the rain had washed everything away he found no sign. Once, in the gray, rain-filled distance, he saw a war-party, and judged it about fifteen braves. They were between him and the Fort that

(Continued On Page 100)

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WESTERN ACTION

(Continued From Page 99)

lay below mountains he could not see and he feared the night to come.

They made another twenty miles, and pulled into the familiar circle. This night all would be on guard, leaving the wagon-train surrounded by guards. The rain was still hounding them, giving them no surcease. Blandon looked at them for signs of breaking, and he found the signs. But there was no back-tracking now; there was only the day ahead, and then Fort Choteau.

Donovan said, "One day into the rain, and then the Fort." He looked at Blandon and looked at the men and got no reply. Blandon had given him the responsibilities of running the rain that day, and this was pleasing to the man.

One man got to his feet. "Where in the hell is that kid?" He looked into the rain, standing wet and cold, and then he went to this wagon, where he saddled a tired mule. Blandon himself looking at Millie O'Brien, her femininity hidden by the folds of the loose slicker.

"He might get through," she said.

Blandon looked at Donovan, who shook his head slowly. The girl did not see the negative gesture. She said, "I'm going on guard—with you, Mr. Blandon."

"Not with me, Millie. You stay with the wagons."

"And be all alone, here? No, I can handle a rifle."

Blandon looked at Donovan again. Donovan took the cue. He said, "Ride with me, miss." The girl agreed and watched Blandon walk to his mule. She was angry and her eyes showed it.

They had made their plans and now men went to stations, the rain and the night hiding them. Donovan and the girl moved off, and Blandon rode to the edges, waiting and riding the guards. He kept thinking of young Hank O'Brien. They'd raise hell in Great Falls in the home-office when they found the kid's body, but it was nobody's fault but Big Jim Jerkins'. He kept remembering the kid's freckled grin. He felt like breaking down and bawling.

(Continued On Page 102)

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WESTERN ACTION

(Continued From Page 100)

THE BLACKFEET hit around two that morning. Blandon was on the south side, riding the guard, and three rifle shots racked loose from the north. That was the sign, and men moved on the run, hollering to each other, and they got to the wagons where they went down in the mud, rifles out in front and the wagons breaking the rain over them.

Blandon was moving around the circle, checking men here and there. Donovan was under a wagon, and Blandon saw the girl crouched beside the wheel, small against the giant iron rim of the Conestoga.

Donovan said, "We saw two, Giff, and we drove them back. That was us you heard shootin'."

Millie said, "I knocked one down. I saw him fall."

Blandon found himself thinking, "One for the kid in payment," but he didn't put it into words. "They can't do anything in this rain and as black as it is. They can just try to sneak into the circle."

And that was the way the rest of the night turned out to be. There was scattered shooting that marred the black simplicity of night, and there were men moving now and then as they shot. You'd see a shadow and shoot at it if it moved, and you wouldn't know whether you'd hit or not because of the screech of the wind in the wagon over you.

A man said, "Dawn will be here, soon."

He had no answer, for every person there feared the dawn. For the rain was breaking and that meant the dawn would be clear. Blandon found himself wondering if the Blackfeet would hit on foot or on horse, and he mentioned that the Apaches always fought mounted. To this Donovan had a brief answer.

"Usually, they fight on horse, but we've got a good fort here to break, so I figure they'll be on foot, but they'll have a horse handy, you bet."

Blandon felt a looseness, for action was here. You were as taut as a fiddlestring inside, and then this tautness broke into action. The dawn came as they had feared, clear and with quick sunshine across the mud-

dy flat, and each clump of sagebrush and greasewood and wild rosebush held its menace and terror.

They had nothing to do but wait, and hope to see, and in seeing shoot at their marks. Blandon found himself wishing they would rush as the Apaches and Navajos rushed. He found himself hoping the scales would tip either way soon.

"Donovan is dead," Millie O'brien said.

Blandon went to his haunches, the wagon-wheel spokes shielding him. He looked at the man and wiped the mud from his still face, and Donovan's mouth sagged open. Blandon found himself calm as he said, "Maybe I had him wrong. Maybe he had a hunch we should've gone back, and maybe he was just true to himself."

"You should have told him that when he was alive."

Blandon lifted his tired eyes. "Don't say that to me, Miss Millie." He was lonely and sick inside.

She said, savagely, "Why don't they ride out and fight? Why do they have to hide behind brush? We ought to rush them!"

Blandon shook his head. "That's what they want, Miss Millie. That way, they'll come in between us and the wagons."

"Damn them."

Blandon asked, "You're not afraid to die?"

It seemed to him that for the first time she looked squarely into the face of death. He saw her eyes contract and she breathed a little heavier. That was all. "Dad says we all have to die, and it doesn't make much difference if it comes sooner or later; the sun will still come up."

"I've thought that," Blandon admitted. "But still, there's not much comfort in it. Well, we're not dead, yet."

BY NOON, seven men were dead. Twelve others were out of the fight, lying in the mud with their wounds. Almost half of their men were gone, out of the running, and Blandon, looking at a dead Blackfeet

(Continued On Page 101)

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WESTERN ACTION

(Continued From Page 108)

that lay twenty yards beyond him, saw now too well the deadly system of these Montana redskins. They were smart and they had the power in their superior numbers and they would bide their time. They'd lose less braves that way, although it would take them longer to gain the wagons.

They had broken open the cases of rifles and powder, using the newer weapons. Five wagons had burned, for a brave had torched one; finally they got the fire out, but they'd lost five Conestogas. That would be a weak link in their chain at dusk, for the Blackfeet could enter here.

They sent out two runners, and Blandon himself saw one of them fall from younder ledge, a bullet in him. He knew that the other did not get through, either; to break through, now, was impossible. He sent out no more, although he had volunteers. They needed every rifle they could muster to hold the wagons.

Not that the wagons, or their cargoes, were of any importance now. Their only value lay in the bulwarks they offered, not in their monetary value. They were the only material things that could ward off bullets.

The day wore on and Blandon found himself thinking, "Maybe the Fort will have out a patrol, and it might hear our firing." But he knew that was out. He would have hit last night, or the night before.

That was the irony of it all; They were a scant twenty miles from the Fort, and almost at the end of their trek.

"They're rushin' us!" a man hollered.

Blandon was on one knee, firing with a coldness. He wondered what had made the sudden activity with the Blackfeet. They came running, bent over, firing as they came; they came out of buckbrush and from behind greasewood and from coulees.

Millie hollered, "I heard a bugle, Blandon! Blandon, I heard a bugle! Honest, Blandon!'

Blandon thought, "She's broke. It's been too much." He had his rifle

(Continued On Page 106)

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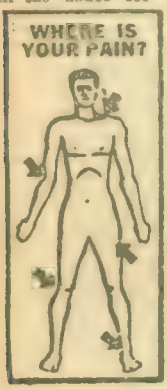

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WESTERN ACTION

(Continued From Page 104)

ready. She grabbed his buckskin jacket. "Look, Blandon, look."

They saw the rider skylined. The wind whipped back his hat, and his horse reared, and his rifle flashed in the dim sunlight. And Blandon knew then why the Blackfeet had made this last, desperate drive.

Riders were coming in and rifles were talking. The Blackfeet had made their stand, and failed. They were running for horses and Blandon was shooting, and besides him Millie O'Brien was firing.

A man rode up on a big sorrel stud. "Millie," he hollered. "Millie, daughter!"

Blandon said, "Here, Major. She can't talk, I guess."

The man came down, big in his uniform, and he said, "You had quite a siege, I guess. What's the matter, girl? Why the bawling like a sick calf?"

"I was thinking of Hank, Dad."

"Hell, he got through. Killed a Blackfeet to do it, but he got into the Fort a while ago, cut up but still in a fighting frame of mind. Running Cloud had given us the slip up north and besides, we never figured you'd come out with wagons from Fort Benton, Blandon."

"We're days late," said Blandon "We had some mud."

"Get your wagons into the Fort." Major O'Brien spoke gruffly. "My men and I have work to do. We'll see you there, possibly tomorrow." He spoke to his daughted. "You ride with Blandon."

They got the wagons moving, leaving the skeletons of the burned Conestogas behind. Blandon took the reins and Millie sat on the seat beside him.

Millie said, "We'd have whipped them, Blandon."

He said, "I don't know. Anyway, we'd gone down fightin'."

Millie said, "Blandon, forget I'm a major's daughter! For God's sake, Blandon, forget it!"

Blandon looked at her freckles. "That sure won't be hard to do," he said.

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There's been more'n one woodsman up in those hills, gone out for an honest day's work loggin', never come back, and it was an agropelter done him in. Folks used to wonder how it come any time a dead branch fell, it seemed like it fell on somebody's head, until they discovered this here agropelter. Seems like it's

(Continued On Page 108)

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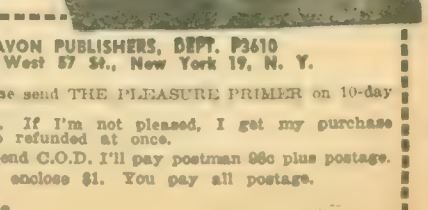

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WESTERN ACTION

(Continued From Page 107)

an animal nobody's ever seen, on account of it always being up high in the treetops, but just let a logger come along with not a worry on his mind, and one of these agropelters'll snap a log at him with the speed of a gun and the aim of a smart kid with a sling-shot. Seems like their arms are just naturally built for that kind of work.

Another native habitant of the big trees on those mountains is what the folks up there call a splinter cat. Your ordinary eastern tenderfoot'll look at a tree all smashed on the top, and think a high wind done it, but the natives there, they know better; a splinter cat's been through lookin' for wild honey, jumpin' from the tree top to another, a-smashin' in the branches at the topmost part with his big square face. Hardly seems like any animal could be so dumb as that splinter-cat, just a-smashin' from one tree to the next, instead of searchin' out a dead tree with a hive, but the folks who live there ought to be the ones who know.

But even at that, they tell a few whizzers up there, tryin' to impress the countryside with the jumpin' vitality of everything, alive or dead, in Oregon, that makes me wonder. Like the one about the man who lived on the Rogue River—they say he was taking a stroll one day along a trail that led round the side of a mountain, and knocked a boulder downhill. Well that rock went clear down the mountain side, but what was so surprising, they say it gathered up so much energy on its way down, that it went plumb up the mountain on the other side of the canyon, without so much as a stop. When it got to the top, or near it, why it just naturally, come rollin' down again, still gathering up energy as it went, so's it rolled clear up to where it came from.

The fellow from up Rogue River, being an Oregonian, and used to natural wonders, he naturally didn't pay much attention to this occurence, but it seems he was somewhat surprised when he finish his stroll and come

(Continued On Page 110)

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(Continued From Page 108)

back a few weeks later, to find that rock still acrashin' up and down the mountains, cuttin' a canyon as wide cross wise as the original one had been lengthwise.

DOWN IN Nebraska, now, they got no mountains to boast about, and so much sunshine they don't like to talk about it. Down there, folks had had to use their imaginations when they made up a story. Talk about Paul Bunyan—down in Nebraska they had a fellow name of Febold Feboldson. This Paul Bunyan, seems like, was asked one time to cut a boundary line between those states to act as a boundary, why they cut it so crooked, if you take a look at any map, you'll see the Republican River a-windin' up and down just north of Kansas, about as straight as a butterfly flies.

After Paul let 'em down folks went to Febold, and asked could he do something about it, and Febold set him down to think. Took him fifteen years to do the job, but when he did it, it was done. He set out first to crossbreed a batch of eagles and some bees he had. Got those bees to be just as big as the eagles, after, he tried long enough then he picked out his biggest, strongest bee, hitched a plow behind it, and set it off to fly a bee-line between the two states. If you take another look at that map, you can see Febold's boundary line straight and flat as a field after a swarm of grasshoppers been by, underneath that wavering line of a river Paul Bunyan made.

Febold liked to use animals, seems like, to get his work done for him. Down Nebraska way, they got somethin called the happy augur, which would appear to me to be distantly related to the agropelter and the splinter cat. This here happy augur its mainly like a kangaroo, but it's got a tail on it made kinda like a corkscrew, and when it sits down to the ground, why it just naturally digs that tail in, and cuts as neat a hole as ever you'd wish to see.

Well, one of the things this Febold was famous for was the postholes he

cut. He was a great fellow for saving, and he figgered out a way he could save the cedar for the posts. Come fall, he'd go out an' cut a row of post-holes where they'd be wanted. Come spring, out he goes again, before the thaw, pulls out the solid posts, froze solid over the winter, stands em up the other way in the holes, with a coat of varnish, and strings em up with wire, as pretty a fence as ever a man made.

But when he thought about the augur, I figger this here Febold decided it was more to the point savin labor than it was savin' wood. He finally let down and let'em bring in red cedar posts, and then he got hold of a happy augur, and sat him down on the ground. Sure enough, the beast dug a hole just right for a post. Then Febold, he'd get up behind the animal in just the right direction, and fire off his six-shooter, scarin' the augur into jumping a good twenty feet off, just to the spot where the next hole was wanted.

WELL FEBOLD was about as smart as a man can be, but that wasn't enough for the Nebraska folks. They had to have Antoine too. Antoine Barada was better than Paul Bunyan, only instead of being smarter, he was stronger. This here Antoine, he would run faster and hit harder and jump higher than anybody else would of even wanted to do. They tell a story of the time some ordinary folks was trying to get a forty foot hitching post for a boat into the ground. They had a pile-driver workin' on that thing, a-thudding and a-thumping, till Antoine got tired of hearing it and tireder yet of waitn' for the job to get done.

Well Antoine, he hiked himself over to the derrick and picked it up and tossed it away; he got so mad at it, he tossed it clear out of state into Ohio. Then he went at that post, and he gave such a bang with his almighty fist he not only sunk it clear through its forty feet, but he drove it down so deep, before he knew what happened, nor anyone else for that matter, they had a artesian well, in Nebraska dry lands, spouting fifty feet up in the air. Would of drowned everyone in

(Continued On Page 112)

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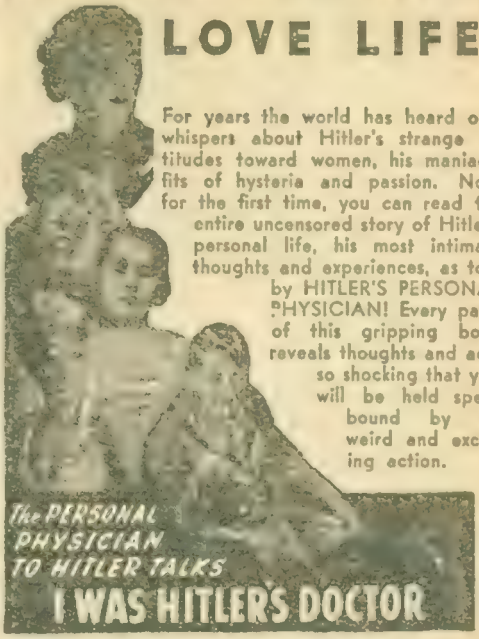

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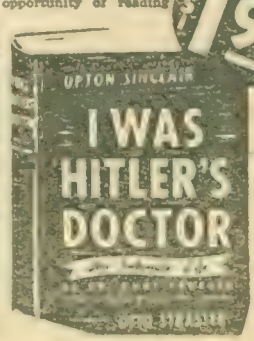

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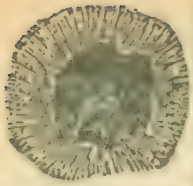

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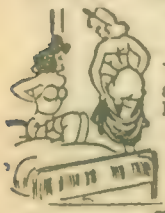

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WESTERN ACTION

(Continued From Page 111)

the neighborhood, too, 'twas coming up that fast, except Antoine sat down hard and stayed atop it til all the folks nearby had a chance to get away.

I HEERD TALL stories up and down the west, and mostly I heerd em around a campfire or in a ranchhouse bunk. Only one state in the union, I reckon, where a story like that'd be likely to get in print in a newspaper like it was fact, and that's the state where people can talk about the biggest little town in the world. Down in Nevada, they had a fellow once wrote on a paper, name of Dan DeQuille, who has himself a name for truthtelling and accuracy, and a-hitting the nail everytime on the head. But this Dan DeQuille, he was a westerner, and wher he made up his mind to tell a story, he could do that too. One day he must o' been short of news for that paper of his, because I seen it myself, the "article" he wrote.

Seems (he said) a fellow out in the desert country, where it's always too hot or too cold, had invented hisself a "solar armor." This solar armor, it was a India rubber suit, with a pocket air compressor, and a pocket battery to run the same. You got too warm out there on the plains, all you had to do was turn on the air conditioning, and there you were, right comfortable. Got too cold, just turn it off.

Well, the fellow who figgered out this contraption, he put it on one day, when it was up about 117 in the shade, and set out upon the desert, to prove how good his gadget was. Got out there, and began to feel overheated, so he turned on the air power, and everything worked fine.

Only trouble was, it seems after a week or so, when he hadn't come back, they sent out a posse to search him out, and found him a-lying on the desert sand, plumb froze to death in the heat. Seems somethin' went wrong and he couldn't get the power turned off. That there contraption was still running full blast, and the poor fellow who'd thought it up, he was lying there dead, with an eighteen-inch icicle hung from his nose.

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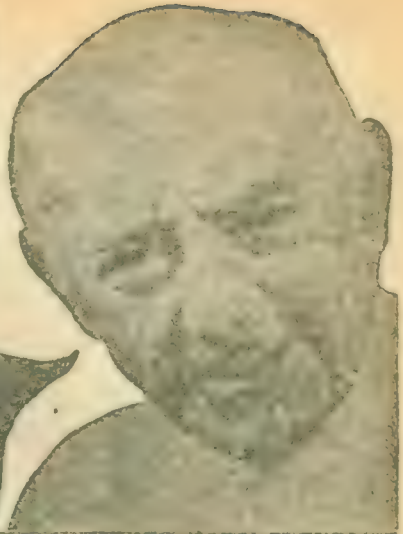

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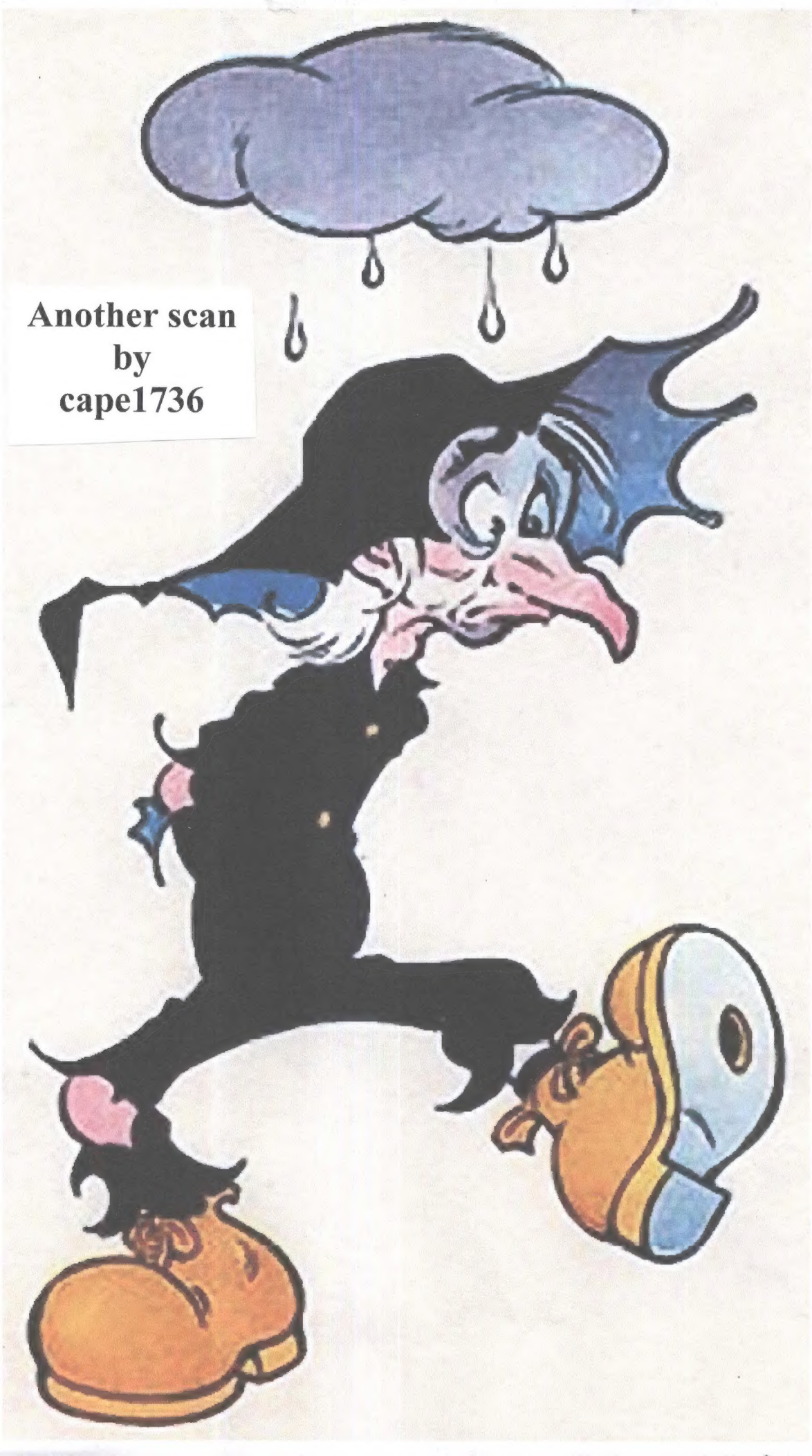

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